

Long game

Inside the drive to put Charlotte's Quail Hollow Club on global golf stage

By Erik Spanberg – Managing Editor, Charlotte Business Journal
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On a recent late-summer afternoon inside the clubhouse at Quail Hollow Club, Johnny Harris, the club president, offered a blunt answer when asked by a reporter how advance sales for the upcoming Presidents Cup compared with expectations.



Johnno and Johnny Harris at Quail Hollow

The number of corporate clients has tripled compared with the previous Presidents Cup played in the U.S., in 2017, while ticket sales have doubled. Without disclosing specific percentages or figures, organizers from the PGA Tour, the owner and operator of the Presidents Cup, have said Charlotte and Quail Hollow long ago surpassed previous revenue records.

“Nobody will be honest with you about this,” Harris told *CBJ*, referring to how results outpaced initial targets. “We’ve so blown it out of the ballpark, it’s unbelievable. Really, we have. We just didn’t know. When you say you’re the biggest build they’ve got in golf — I mean, hell, man, nobody thought we were going to have to do that. But you know what? We got away with it.”

By “build,” Harris means the temporary structures erected to house all those corporate guests and other fans around the course as well as concessions areas and other diversions.

The PGA Tour sanctions dozens of weekly tournaments, including Charlotte’s Wells Fargo Championship, also played at Quail Hollow. Of the events the PGA Tour owns and runs — Presidents Cup, the Tour Championship, The Players Championship and World Golf Championship tournaments — the upcoming Presidents Cup will have the largest footprint with 550,000 square feet of flooring plus another 50,000 square feet being used for temporary kitchens and other back-of-house structures. Until now, 400,000 square feet was the biggest.

Those comparisons exclude the major golf events run by the PGA of America (PGA Championship and Ryder Cup), Augusta National Golf Club’s Masters tournament, and the United States Golf Association’s U.S. Open.

Adam Sperling, executive director for the upcoming event, put it this way: “By every measure, it’s the largest Presidents Cup.” Sperling was appointed by the PGA Tour to oversee the Charlotte event and moved here early in 2018.

A look inside the build for the upcoming Presidents Cup at Quail Hollow Club. (Sept. 15, 2022)

The match-play competition held every two years was created in the image of the older, and better-known, Ryder Cup. But, as Charlotte’s sales results reflect, the Presidents Cup is booming nearly three decades into its lifespan.

Harris, a 75-year-old local real estate executive whose father founded Quail Hollow 60 years ago with a group of fellow businessmen, has been the driving force to make professional golf a prominent part of the sports scene in Charlotte. During the recent interview with *CBJ* — flanked by his 43-year-old son and business partner, Johnno Harris, who is the event’s chairman, and Sperling of the PGA Tour — Johnny Harris said that what may now look inevitable was, in fact, a gradual process.

It was the elder Harris who persuaded the PGA Tour to return to Quail Hollow following a 24-year absence in 2003, right after he had carried out ambitious makeovers and improvements of the course, clubhouse and practice area while convincing Wachovia Corp. to sign on as title sponsor.

Wells Fargo & Co. inherited that long-term sponsorship when it bought rapidly disintegrating, Charlotte-based Wachovia in 2008. Backlash over the Great Recession and federal bank bailout prompted Wells Fargo to keep its name off the Quail Hollow tournament in 2009 and 2010 even as the company paid \$7 million annually as title sponsor. Johnny Harris, unsure of the bank’s

commitment, wooed the PGA of America in the meantime, securing the 2017 PGA Championship and announcing that agreement in 2010.

Five years later, the PGA Tour awarded Quail Hollow the 2021 Presidents Cup; the Covid-19 shutdown in 2020 delayed the event to 2022.

Harris said the 2017 PGA Championship changed the calculus: More than 200,000 fans came to Quail Hollow that week and economic benefit estimates ran as high as \$100 million. The day before the first round of competitive play, the PGA of America's CEO began his press conference by telling reporters, "So, we, of course, need to get through this week, but I would tell you, we can't wait to get back here. I think it's 100% in our plans to bring the PGA Championship back to Quail Hollow."



In May 2020, the PGA of America made good on that promise, awarding the Charlotte club the 2025 PGA Championship.

"You brought up the PGA Championship," Johnny Harris said. "We had been going along and building and building. We were just really starting to get into a whole new role with the Wells Fargo, and then we had the PGA Championship."

Rave reviews nationally and hot-ticket status locally and regionally grabbed attention beyond hard-core golf fans, Harris said.

"It sort of took the wrapping off golf in Charlotte," he added. "And it went from being something they did at Quail Hollow to something Quail Hollow, Charlotte, the Carolinas did. And now, all of

a sudden, it's become something that Charlotte, the Carolinas, Quail Hollow, and the United States of America is going to be putting on for the world.”

Johnny Harris counted champion golfer Arnold Palmer among his closest friends and, as a member at Augusta National, has maintained close relationships with generations of PGA Tour players. All those things worked in his, and Quail Hollow's, favor — aided by \$40 million in course and club improvements over the past 25 years — but the Harris family acknowledges they still needed to build a track record to reach this point.

They are secure in Quail Hollow's standing now. So much so that Johnny Harris, a softer-spoken and lower-key chip off the old block, told *CBI* as much with a pointed reference to the former PGA Tour commissioner: “Now, Tim Finchem can't say we don't have history. We do.”



The Wells Fargo Championship, through contracts with the bank and the PGA Tour, is committed for two more years: 2023 and 2024. This year, it was played near Washington, D.C. to allow for Presidents Cup course preparation. In 2025, the PGA Championship returns. After that, the club has nothing else scheduled.

Johnny Harris has said for years that his goal is to have the best players in the world at Quail Hollow Club — and he's always steered clear of saying whether that will be annually or occasionally. For the past two decades, it's been every year, other than 2020, when the pandemic forced the cancellation of the Wells Fargo Championship.

Asked by *CBJ* what he envisions next for Quail Hollow, Johnny Harris deflected and said the decision rests with the club's board. He praised the club's 330 members for their willingness to stage the tournaments, and endure the attendant setup and tear-down those events bring, for the past two decades.

"We'll continue to look at options," Johnny Harris said. "The only thing I'm absolutely sure of is we're going to have a (PGA) Tour event next year and the year after. And then we're going to have the PGA Championship."

"And I would assume, sometime over the next three years, somebody will come and ask if we'd like to dance — and at that point, the board will make that decision." Smiling, he added, "The music may be playing now."



The Presidents Cup is of similar scale to the PGA Championship but with a much different layout and design. For the PGA Championship, a dramatic entrance walkway was erected through the club's main parking area and fans emerged near the 18th green. For the Presidents Cup, the club's new main entrance and transportation drop-off allows for a path on the other side of the course, including a newly built pedestrian bridge that avoids delays for everyone (fans, cars and golf carts) on the main internal road.

Fans will enter at the front nine, where there is no doubt that the No. 1 tee is center stage. The PGA Tour developed a mini-amphitheater, a 2,500-capacity, double-decker structure that enshrouds the tee. It includes exterior and interior video boards as well as a tunnel where players will enter to begin their rounds, surrounded by throngs of fans. Along the left side of the No. 1

fairway sits the main merchandise tent, a 37,000-square-foot venue that is to tents what the Great Pyramids are to sandcastles.

It is slightly smaller than the PGA Championship merch shop, which covered 43,000 square feet. The Presidents Cup emporium spans roughly two-thirds of a football field and offers endless tchotchkes to empty your personal coffers. The inventory will include 88,000 units of specialty items and gifts, 50,000 hats and 35,000 shirts.

During a recent tour of the course with Sperling — who piloted U.S. Captain Davis Love III's speedy custom cart to zip around the Quail Hollow layout — he showed off the endless variations of hospitality clubs and suites. He credited an adaptable setup for enabling several rounds of expanded capacity as inventory dwindled.

“We never had to say no,” Sperling said. “We were able to say, ‘It’s gone over there but we’ve got something very similar over here.’”



Through some parts of the course, trees were incorporated to provide additional shade, with hospitality areas built around the trunks and beneath the expansive canopy. Improvements in recent years at the practice center provided ample space to build an 18,000-square-foot media center at the far end of the range. The media center is opposite a pair of 6,000-square-foot cabins: one for each 12-member team and their coaches.

The team cabins include meeting and dining space, physiotherapy areas, locker rooms and more. In between the cabins is a fan grandstand, allowing views of players coming and going as well as their preparations on the range.

And, with 800 companies expected to be entertaining clients and prospects at Quail Hollow, as well as increased interest from fans overseas because of the International Team, organizers and civic leaders alike are hopeful that decision-makers will be exposed to Charlotte for the first time or for an extended period that lends additional insight and piques their curiosity.

The Harrises, without disclosing particulars, said they have learned of extensive entertainment plans by and for national and international companies and executives at Quail Hollow and in other parts of town for Presidents Cup week.

“Some of the most influential business leaders are affiliated with the PGA Tour,” said John Boyd, principal at site-selection firm The Boyd Co., based in Boca Raton, Florida. “These events — we call them ‘crown jewels’ for economic development — but they’re also platforms to showcase new development happening in Charlotte. These are televised events and there’s commentary about Charlotte. And they provide platforms for deals to get done.”



Boyd, whose national portfolio includes extensive work in North Carolina, said that the unending debates about economic impact based on hotel rooms filled and restaurant meals sold and other expenses borne by visitors are less important than the relationship-building that major sporting events foster.

Independent economists and other skeptics tend to dismiss such selling points as minimal, particularly when such events are attracted with taxpayer money or held at publicly financed arenas and stadiums. Quail Hollow is privately owned. City government approved \$1.5 million

two years ago from a portion of existing tourism tax revenue to help pay for the enclosed drop-off and pick-up area for shuttle buses at the club.

There is a significant tax aspect to this: PGA Tour events are run by local nonprofits that donate a portion of proceeds to charity and use some of the money to reinvest in the event, including venue improvements. Champions For Education, owner of the Wells Fargo Championship, has distributed \$26 million since 2003 to local charities; the Presidents Cup has given \$54 million since 1994.

“These tournaments are a great opportunity above and beyond the influx generated,” Boyd said.

City government, the Charlotte Regional Business Alliance and the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina have all taken heed, sharing expenses to entertain as many as 50 prospects and site consultants at the Presidents Cup.

“I don’t want to take away from what happens on the golf course, but it’s also what happens off the golf course,” Johnno Harris said. “We all believe that Charlotte’s a pretty good place to host people — Southern hospitality and all that.”

Never one to tamp down expectations, his father added, “I think you’re going to be shocked. Charlotte is going to be shocked.”