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'PEOPLE WILL COME' TO COURSE IN THE CORN

BOB GILLESPIE

Senior Writer

FURMAN - Chris McKenzie has heard all the "Field of Dreams" analogies about his mom-and-pop golf course carved out of former cornfields. Heck, he has made a few of them himself. After all, it's good advertising.

"It's amazing; it is like the movie," says the 37-year-old superintendent/part-owner at **Penny Branch** Club, an 18-hole, family-built golf oasis in this tiny farming community in rural Hampton County. "You build it, and people run their mouths about it, and next thing you know, others show up."

A few years ago, a group of Sun City retirees drove up from Hardeeville to play. "Afterward they said, 'We have friends coming from Ireland,' " says Wendy Wolverton, McKenzie's sister and the club's director of sales and marketing. "Now they come every other year for a week to play a Ryder Cup-type event."

What avid golfer hasn't at one time or another thought, "If I could build my own course, this is how it would be?" Seven years ago, Chris McKenzie was that guy - and he had the tools to make it happen.

His father, Truett McKenzie, had farmed the roughly 250 acres in Hampton County most of his life, but in 1984 decided to quit. "We had all these pretty crops, but you couldn't get any money for them," Chris says.

The McKenzies began selling golf course equipment, servicing courses and applying chemicals. In 1990, they formed Trumac Construction, and Chris, who had worked summers at golf courses since high school, learned how to drive a bulldozer.

For 10 years, he subcontracted irrigation work for PGA Tour player/course designer Davis Love III, helping build Fripp Island's Ocean Creek and Greenwood's The Patriot, and for Irmo native Bobby Weed, who builds courses out of Ponte Vedra, Fla.

McKenzie's problem was finding skilled labor. "All the guys we hired, farm boys, didn't know anything about a golf course," he says.

So in 1998, McKenzie and his father built a golf hole that employees could use for practice; it's now **Penny Branch's** par-4 11th hole. "I love to play golf," says Chris, a single-digit handicap, "so we built two more - a par-3 and a par-5 - and we'd play each six times for par 72."

Says Wolverton, "They looked so good, and we said, 'We've got the land,' so Chris decided to make it nine holes" in 1998. By 2000, realizing "no one's going to drive here to play nine holes," McKenzie had built nine more.

They had a golf course; what the McKenzies needed next were customers. Furman has a population of about 250, of whom "maybe five or six play," Wolverton says. She began advertising in the nearby areas and Georgia; in 2003, "we decided to go really big," with TV and radio spots and fliers in S.C. welcome centers.

Those who come find a course that, surprisingly given the land's flatness, offers a variety of holes and shots. McKenzie, who commutes from Columbia, modeled his holes after favorites he had played and built them with lightning-quick greens "because I like fast greens."

The course's gems are its five par-3s. No. 2, hard by the creek that gives **Penny Branch** its name, has grass bunkers in front and a mounded surface. Then come Nos. 7 and 8: an "island" green behind a horseshoe of water with woods on either side - McKenzie visualized the 17th hole at the TPC at Sawgrass - followed by a cloverleaf-shaped green with bunkers in each corner that Wolverton calls "craters on the moon."

No. 15, a 196-yarder, plays to a Donald Ross-style mounded green that rises 10 feet above the surrounding surface. No. 17, a 203-yard monster, has Scottish grass mounds surrounding the undulating surface.

Penny Branch isn't long at 6,550 yards from the back tees (6,018 from member tees), but two holes offer plenty of length, plus McKenzie's personal touches. The 436-yard par-4 16th, his favorite, has a large tree in the middle of the fairway, and the brutal 616-yard par-5 18th hole has the creek crossing its fairway.

As yet, Love and Weed haven't come to see **Penny Branch**, but McKenzie has entertained ex-college players "who love it." He enjoys their comments, but takes the most delight from those who stumble upon his baby.

"Driving into town, most are skeptical," he says. "But when they leave, they say, 'Man, I didn't expect to see this out here in the middle of nowhere.' "

Which, naturally, is what makes it special.

PENNY BRANCH CLUB

IF YOU'RE GOING: From Columbia, take U.S. 321 south to Estill. Turn left on S.C. 3, then right about two miles later on U.S. 601. It is five miles to Furman. Turn left at Town Hall Road. At end of road, turn left on McKenzie Trail. Golf course is on right.

RATES: Monday-Thursday, \$24; Friday, \$27; Saturday-Sunday, \$31. All rates include cart.

TELEPHONE: (877) 623-6423 toll free

OTHER UNIQUE S.C. COURSES

South Carolina has nearly 400 golf courses, public and private, ranging from plush resort layouts in Hilton Head and Myrtle Beach to small-town nine-hole designs. A number of courses stand out from the crowd, for unique reasons. Here is a handful of the most interesting:

PALMETTO GOLF CLUB

The state's oldest course (founded 1892), it shares nearby Augusta National's heritage: architect Alister Mackenzie converted the Aiken course's greens to grass in the 1930s. Private; occasional public play.

CAMDEN GOLF CLUB

Pinehurst No. 2 architect Donald Ross built hundreds of courses, including several nine-hole layouts in South Carolina, but this is the state's only 18-hole course recognized by the Donald Ross Society, and the same turtleback greens that drove players at this year's U.S. Open crazy. Private.

BOGEYVILLE GOLF COURSE

Featured in the 1999 book "Blue Fairways," this is a homebuilt course located on U.S. 1 near Aiken. The par-5 second hole is unique: the fairway U-turns so that the green is almost adjacent to the tee, though the "shortcut" is blocked by trees. Public.

WORLD TOUR GOLF LINKS

Built in Myrtle Beach as a "tribute band" course, its 27 holes are inspired by such well-known holes as Augusta National's "Amen Corner" stretch of Nos. 12-14, plus others from St. Andrews, Pinehurst No. 2, Oakmont, Inverness and Royal Troon. Public.

YEAMANS HALL

A Seth Raynor-designed jewel in Hanahan, with square greens and an atmosphere straight out of the 1920s. Private.

-Bob Gillespie

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Illustration:PHOTO: COLOR

1. **Penny Branch** Club's south hole. The course, in rural Hampton County, is 6,550 yards from the back tees. PHOTOGRAPHS SPECIAL TO THE STATE
2. The 11th hole used to sit alone, as a practice hole for employees of Chris and Truett's company, Trumac Construction.
3. McKenzie
4. Wolverton