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Steve Neuliep, CGCS and Etowah Valley are on the path to mutual success.

IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS THAT MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

By Trent Bouts

Mid-June, Tim Rice, one of 14 owners and the managing partner of Etowah Valley Golf and Resort near Hendersonville, NC, is addressing nearly two dozen golf writers over dinner at the facility they purchased in 2014. A 30-year veteran of the hotel and hospitality industry, Rice is clearly comfortable at the podium as he explains where WNC Resort Properties plans to take the 50-year-old facility in a new era. He is just as confident when he introduces the man he says “will get us there” – director of golf operations, Steven Neuliep, CGCS.

One of only two people in the room in a sports coat, Neuliep stands and begins to describe the road map for a journey that will yet take several more years. The 27-hole facility occupies the site of an old brickyard so the soil is less than ideal, he explains. The trees are massive and many, and relentless traffic has made growing high-quality turfgrass harder still.

The jacket is notable for the fact that it is one of the “little things” Neuliep believes are important. The next morning he asks a photographer to hold fire while he jumps out of his cart to wipe a mud smear from the front of the vehicle. A few minutes later he calls pause again to straighten the flagstick on a nearby green.

“Some of the little things you do in life can have a large impact,” Neuliep, 57, explains. “Sometimes the impact is something you don’t anticipate.” Like the day he received a

phone call out of nowhere inviting him to interview for the role of superintendent at a nine-hole course in southwest Michigan. This was not your average nine-holer.

The Dunes Club, on the shores of Lake Michigan, was the first venture into golf course development for Mike Keiser, the same Mike Keiser who would go on to create the much-vaunted Bandon Dunes, Cabot Valley and more recently, Sand Valley. Inspired by Keiser’s passion for Pine Valley Golf Club – long-ranked among the handful of best courses in the world – the Dunes Club occupied 100 acres in a striking, pure, almost old-world fashion. In 1997, Sports Illustrated rated it the number one nine-hole golf course in the country.

“It was high, high end,” Neuliep says. “Basically an unlimited budget. At one point I had 35 employees. When I got there I think there were like 12 or 15 members. Just a really special place.”

He got the job – at least in part – because he took care of one of those “little things.” After playing the Dunes Club as a guest during a visit to his parents nearby, he sent handwritten letters of thanks to Keiser, the superintendent and the owner of the management company. At the time he was working more than two hours south at Lafayette Elks Country Club in Indiana.

“Taking that extra time and effort, I just wanted the opportunity to play there now and then when I was home to see my parents,” he says. “I did it with no hopes of ever getting a job there. But apparently it really impressed the people at the management company. They wanted to move the Dunes Club superintendent to open a new course in the Chicago area so they called me up and within two weeks they offered me the position.”

With the greatest respect, Etowah Valley is no Dunes Club but Rice and his co-owners believe it has the potential to be something special within its realm. They have already invested in the order of \$2 million including an extensive irrigation and drainage overhaul on the South nine, a new fleet of golf carts, renovation of 65 lodging rooms, upgrading



Steve Neuliep, CGCS is thriving in the driver's seat at Etowah Valley.

on-site restaurants and purchasing an adjacent smokehouse restaurant.

"We're not anywhere near where we want to be but we sure are excited about where we're going," Rice tells those golf writers. "And Steven Neuliep will get us there because he is the man!"

It's not mere hype. Rice's group believes enough in Neuliep's across-the-board abilities to have expanded his initial role beyond golf course maintenance to include oversight of all golf operations. It took some time but wearing that hat, Neuliep was able to institute a program of delayed starting times to allow for maintenance practices that had long been crowded out by golf traffic.

"That's part of the reason we were in the shape we were in," he says. "We never had the opportunity to do any extra aerifications, to do a lot of the maintenance practices that are necessities, rudimentary things really. My first two years here I couldn't even topdress greens except when we aerified. I know we needed to do it but if you don't have time to even work the sand in, it just doesn't work."

Over a three-day annual tournament known as the Battle of the Smokies, those golf writers from North Carolina and Tennessee came to agree that those bentgrass greens are now first-class. Neuliep carved time to give them the TLC they desperately needed by holding off tee-times until noon on each nine in turn one day a week.

"Forever we had been sending out golfers on all three nines at 8am," he says. "Think about that. If you have to get everything done for three nines before 8am that means three

times the labor, three times the equipment. There just weren't the resources for that so the condition of the golf course suffered. We had to figure out who we were as a resort. A lot of my new role is trying to sort those things out and make the best decisions from both a golf course and a business perspective...because we weren't."

The Carolinas GCSA visited Etowah Valley for the association's annual fall mountain meeting in 2008. Neuliep was there, and actually finished second in the golf tournament teaming with Jeremy Boone, CGCS who was at Sequoyah National Golf Club at the time. Of course Neuliep had no idea then he would be working there almost a decade later. But the career path of many long-term superintendents is a winding one and often scattered with potholes and blind turns.

For example, Boone, a former Carolinas GCSA director, was a CGCS back in '08 but has since traded that in for an MBA after his name and manages three hardware stores in western North Carolina. Neuliep, who also spent seven years on the Carolinas GCSA board, had also experienced change in 2007 when his contract wasn't renewed - "even after seven years of glowing performance reviews" - at the Country Club of Asheville.

From there he went to the Chattooga Club in Cashiers, NC where he maintained a five-acre putting course and croquet lawns but the lion's share of his job was project management including everything from new housing to infrastructure. He and the club would be busy for the next few years until the recession took hold and new development ground to a halt. With no projects to manage and the golf

industry holding its breath, Neuliep again found himself looking for a job. His options were further limited by the fact he didn't want to leave Asheville where his partner, Tammy, grew up and had built her own career. He took a job in sales with Nutra Turf. It turned out to be more than a change of pace and weekends off.

"I have to admit I was shocked at the perception and reception from when you are a superintendent to when you make the transition to sales," he says. "I'm still the same person. I still have the same knowledge base. But I found too many people look at somebody differently once they are in sales. I think you could say some superintendents view sales people as inconveniences."

Neuliep believes that is a detriment to the superintendents themselves. "To me, sales people can be among your biggest assets," he says. "They have a lot of knowledge but they're also seeing multiple different courses day in day out. So they're seeing different agronomic programs being put into practice. If you ask them the right questions you can really tap in to that knowledge base.

We, as superintendents, could do a better job of using them as resources."

For two years he laid the groundwork and put in the miles to establish himself on what is often referred to as the "other side of the fence." Then he learned of changes afoot at Etowah Valley and the old spark began to take flame. "It was a very difficult decision," he says of throwing his hat in the ring. "I was doing fairly well in sales but I'll be honest with you, when I really looked long and hard at it, I kind of always missed growing grass. In the back of my mind I always missed it."

Today, Neuliep finds himself satisfied, perhaps more than ever before in his career because he draws on skills gained from the full breadth of his experience - there's grass of course but also some construction, some project management, logistics and even some sales in building buy-in for changes from the club's 280-plus members. That is not to say it's not challenging. Neuliep has some 200 acres under various degrees of maintenance but just 16 full time equivalents in season and as few as eight in winter. But he is "the man" in ways most superintendents would dearly love to be.

"In a typical country club situation you have to go through three committees and a board of directors just to cut two trees down. My owners have basically given me carte blanche," he says. "I don't have total autonomy but they have put faith in me to make decisions. There's no having to jump through nine different hoops to implement a decision that makes obvious business sense.

"Where I am in my career, I realize that I may not have



A look at some of the dense tree growth and shade it generates at Etowah Valley.

the opportunity to be at a top 100 golf course. At this stage, I'm really looking to make a positive impact on a facility. It's not that my efforts weren't appreciated before but it was never quite to the extent it is here. To me this is one of the most rewarding experiences of my career." ■

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