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SPORTS

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Western Lakes maintains its charm

Course celebrating 50th year, 25th under current ownership

By Daniel Mike
Freeman Staff

PEWAUKEE — Jim Culhane can be stubborn.

A retired lawyer, Culhane has had several friends try to lure him into joining a country club.

But they've given up in recent years, because Culhane is perfectly content playing golf at Western Lakes Golf Club.

"They've been trying to get me to join those courses and gave up," Culhane said. "I enjoy Western Lakes too much.

"It's not where you play but who you play with, and that's why I enjoyed playing there."

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Culhane was a member at Tumblebrook Country Club, and he stuck with the course when Greg Essig and Gary Monfre bought it 25 years ago and changed it to Western Lakes. He hasn't seen much change in the course.

"I joined Tumblebrook because I knew a few of the guys out there and didn't want to keep playing a different course all the time," Culhane said. "I see a lot of the same guys every year. ... The only thing that's really changed over the years is



Charles Auer/Freeman Staff

Wind whips a flag at Western Lakes Golf Club on Friday.

At a glance

What: Western Lakes Golf Club
Where: W287-N1963 Oakton Road, Pewaukee
Owners: Greg and Paula Essig
PGA Pro: Greg Johnson
Superintendent: Jack Soderberg
Amenities: The practice club features a large tee area, target greens, a chipping green, a bunker green and a large putting green. There is also a banquet hall for weddings and other events.
More Information: 691-0900 or www.westernlakes.com

"Because the resort burned down, it slowed things down and the growth didn't come out of Milwaukee as they thought and it went through bankruptcy.

"In 1988 we bought the place, changed the place and

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kept some of the traditions. But we made it more public than it was originally intended to be."

Western Lakes is a public course, but memberships are available. Its view of Pewaukee Lake is picturesque, and those who play the course enjoy that it can be challenging yet not too difficult that it constantly frustrates golfers.

"We have really 18 solid holes of golf — not too easy and not too hard," Western Lakes PGA pro Greg Johnson said. "It's a test, yet it's playable, and it's not too hard. It's a test and yet it's playable, and that fits a lot of golfers and what they're looking for.

"No. 17 is probably our signature hole, a longer par 3 over water on a nice setting. It's late in the round, so if you have one of your best rounds, the water looks a little bluer."

Johnson, who has been a



Charles Auer/Freeman Staff

Western Lakes Golf Club owner Greg Essig stands in the clubhouse overlooking the course Friday.

pro throughout the state and has been at Western Lakes for 13 years, finds that even though the course is tough, it isn't intimidating.

"It's nice when you get on the tee," he said. "For the first-time player or someone who hasn't played here a lot, when you stand on any one of the tees the hole is pretty much in front of you. Nothing is hid-

den. There are no gimmicks. "If you play the hole well, you can have a shot at a birdie or par. But you also know that if you mishit a shot, you may be looking at some trouble. It keeps your head in the game."

Western Lakes hosts several golf events, and charitable work is something for which Essig takes great pride.

"I have a triangle philoso-

the (PGA) pro."

Essig and his wife, Paula, bought out Monfre and his wife, Maureen, seven years ago. When the two couples bought the course 25 years ago, they didn't see much need to change.

Tumblebrook was built 50 years ago with the intent of also having a resort on the premises. The resort burned down, and that slowed the growth of the course.

"It was kind of a nice dream," Essig said.

phy. There's charity, the customer and the employees," Essig said. "We've helped facilitate \$12 to \$13 million dollars in revenue raised by different organizations throughout outings at our place."

Essig has worked to keep rates fairly low at Western Lakes, trying to bring more golfers into the club knowing that money has been tight for some in recent years.

"People have a lot of other things going on," Essig said. "Everybody is looking for a couple bucks to save. We do a lot with couples golf, events on Saturday afternoons.

"We've got to try to change a little of the structure and continually work to get people out to our place. We can't just say, 'The doors are open, come in.' You want to invite them to your place."

The club has worked to get younger golfers onto the course throughout recent years as well, trying to build future business.

"We have one of the biggest junior programs in the area,"

Essig said. "We have 250 kids a year come through our junior program. That is our future.

"We believe those kids are going to grow up and be golfers. There's not a lot of money in a kid paying \$3 or \$4 for some snacks, but if 20 percent of these kids come back each year, over 15 years that really grows."

In addition to golf, Western Lakes offers a banquet facility that caters to weddings and other events, and Saz's Catering handles the food at the club. It generates revenue all year, and it helps show off the club to those who may not have originally thought of golfing at West-

ern Lakes.

That's been a great benefit this spring, as constant rain has made golfing slow.

"We normally open right around Masters weekend," Essig said. "Normally, we want to get rolling in early April.

"We're certainly behind. All golf courses are. It's been a brutal spring, and there's nothing you can do about that."

"It's time get out and play golf," he added. "It's a great sport. It's a game of a lifetime.

"It's time to get started."

Email: dmike@conley.net.com