

# Reinventing Edgewood CC

## New owners vow to make club even better

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**RIVER VALE** – The past decade hasn't been friendly to the golf course industry. And the struggles have been felt here in North Jersey.

Many see traditional country clubs as a dying breed. According to the National Golf Foundation, more than 700 U.S. golf courses closed between 2005 and 2014, including 157 last year alone.

But others see an opportunity: Perhaps with a few changes in philosophy, and some smart investments in infrastructure, a golf club still can thrive.

That's the hope of Eric Witmond and Bruce Schonbraun, the new owners of Edgewood Country Club.

While other area courses are closing, making way for residential developments, these real estate experts plan on keeping golf alive at Edgewood, a 27-hole private club that's been around since 1956.

"The club has everything," said Witmond, an Englewood resident. "The bones are here. We just need to bring it up to another level."

The club won't keep all of its 27 holes. Witmond acknowledges that eventually nine of the holes will be turned into a residential development "years" from now, leaving an 18-hole course.

But the new ownership already has shown its commitment to golf and the club as a whole, starting a capital improvement plan that will invest "millions" in the club over the next few years, according to Witmond.

The driving range already has been revamped. Soon, renovation and redesign work will begin on the course, new carts will be purchased, the clubhouse will be renovated and the pool area will be redone.

It's all part of a plan Witmond calls "New Edgewood." All the improvements are being done at no cost to the members.

"[The new owners] know that there's a lot of great things about Edgewood, and they don't want to change those things," said Keith Larsen, the longtime head pro at Edgewood and current director of golf. "But the things that aren't great, they want to make first class. And as an employee, that's the kind of place you want to work for. ... It's exciting from the members' standpoint; it's exciting from the staff standpoint, too.

Last year, when the club was put up for sale, there was worry among Edgewood's members that the club's rich golf history would be coming to an end. According to Witmond, approximately 50 members left the club over the winter before Witmond and Schonbraun took over April 1.

Those members were worried Edgewood might be going the way of other area golf courses.

High Mountain, a semi-private club in Franklin Lakes, closed its doors last fall after being bought by new ownership and 275 homes will be built on the property.

Apple Ridge Country Club, in Mahwah and Saddle River, was sold a year ago. Sometime in the not too distant future, the course will be closed and replaced with nearly 400 homes – according to applications for development made last fall.

But in Edgewood, the new ownership saw the



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Golfers practice at Edgewood CC, where its owners have plans to put money into the club.

property as a unique opportunity to implement their plan for a successful country club.

"If it had been an 18-hole golf course with a small clubhouse and halfway house, we would not have been interested in operating it," Witmond said. "Because this has 27 holes and all of these other facilities, pool, tennis court, we're able to create a family environment."

Witmond and Schonbraun want to change the culture of country clubs.

"We want the family to feel like the club is for them," Witmond said. "As opposed to the old days where the man of the house went to the club Saturday and Sunday, ran away from the family and was detached. Now, everybody's together."

But they also want to have a top-notch golf experience.

Witmond and Schonbraun know golf well – both are members at nearby Mountain Ridge CC – and their philosophy for success starts with creating a good golf course.

Witmond praised the work of golf course superintendent Michael Scott, who has the course in immaculate condition after taking over two years ago.

The new ownership is also bringing in renowned golf course architect Ron Prichard to help oversee the

course renovations scheduled for the coming years.

"First and foremost is putting money into the golf course and making this the best golf course," Witmond said. "Because the golf course is what drives people to the membership."

There are early indications that the changes already made, and the commitment to future improvements, are working. According to Witmond, Edgewood has added 15 new members the past two months. Several former members have committed to returning.

But the new owners also want to make sure some things don't change too much.

They also like the close-knit membership at Edgewood. While some members left during the uncertainty of winter, more than 130 of them stuck around hoping the club might return.

And when golf did return, there were many hugs and high-fives.

Longtime employees such as Larsen and Rocky Manheimer, the caddie master who has been working at Edgewood for 34 years, stuck around despite opportunities to leave.

"We don't lose the traditions of what makes Edgewood important," Witmond said. "But we have to incorporate what today's golf members want for themselves and their families."