

Chicagoland Family Owned Golf Courses

“Where everybody knows your game”

In a world full of Facebook friends, Twitter chatter, and texting instead of talking, the personal touch often gets overlooked, but not by families who own and operate a golf course for a living. They love it, breathe it, and tirelessly give golfers a much needed respite from their day to day problems when they welcome you to their course. After visiting each of these facilities in the Chicagoland area, you will become part of their “Cheers” family, where everybody knows your game!

Balmoral Woods Country Club

Throughout our list of “Family Owned Golf Courses” you will find legendary golf history, excellent courses, and well established businesses, but the Mortell Family at Balmoral Woods Country Club is one of the most accomplished golfing families on our list. Born and raised in Kankakee, Illinois, Don Mortell grew to love the game while caddying at Kankakee Country Club. During his collegiate career at Purdue University Don met Margi, fell in love, and married her in 1952. After the wedding, he was stationed in Fort Bragg, North Carolina and started fine tuning his game at the Army base course. Introduced to the game by her husband, Margi became an accomplished amateur player and has since won six Kankakee Country Club championships and four Olympia Fields Country Club titles. Once Margi started acquiring accolades, Don grew just as competitive winning multiple club championships at Kankakee and Olympia Fields as well as qualifying for the U.S. Senior Amateur Championship in 1985. Their two sons Mike and David both grew up playing in junior tournaments and were members of the Purdue University Men’s Golf Team. Mike played in three U.S. Amateur Championships and won the 1990 Illinois State Amateur before becoming an investment manager. After qualifying to play in four Illinois State Amateur Championships, David became the General Manager at Balmoral and believes that “The family’s experience traveling all over the country playing at a high level, has certainly helped us when it comes to managing and maintaining our own course.”

After Don finished his service in the Army, he returned home to run the family business. Before selling the family business he became an investor in the Holiday Inn at Balmoral. The hotel, race track, and golf course never developed into the resort community the original investors envisioned, and Don took over the development in the early 1970’s. His first order of business was to hire designer George Fazio to give the course a facelift and in 1975, the 18 hole par-72 design was established. Located just off Route 394 in Crete, Illinois, Balmoral Woods features tree lined fairways, multiple water hazards, and measures just over 6,600 yards from the back tees. Its traditional designed greens are tipped from back to front, but the Mortell family raises the bar concerning the condition of the putting surfaces. David explains that, “We pride ourselves in providing the best conditioned golf course, concentrating on quality putting surfaces for a fair price.” Measuring 548 yards the double dogleg par 5 7th is Balmoral’s signature hole and it requires a long, but straight tee shot to be able to go for the green in two. “Our par 5’s are rather scorable, but each one of the par 3’s requires a well struck tee shot with a long iron to reach the green.” As current host of the Will County Amateur Championship, Balmoral Woods has seen its share of great golfers, as well as celebrities, hoist the championship trophy as Dallas Cowboys Quarterback Tony Romo won the title back in 2009.

Balmoral Woods also caters to youngsters just learning the game, as it is a certified U.S. Kids golf course with the appropriate tee markers in place. Central Illinois PGA Teacher of the Year and U.S. Kids Golf Top 50 Teacher Bill Abrams runs the Golf Solutions Academy, which provides a structured environment for kids to develop their skills and learn how to compete. The proud grandfather of 22 grandkids Don Mortell knows that his hard work has provided a place for generations of kids to learn this great game.

Broken Arrow Golf Club

A native of Taiwan, Agie Chen learned to play golf back home and when he relocated to the U.S. in 1985 decided to bring his love of the game and the dream of owning his own golf course with him. Named after the discovery of an old Indian arrowhead during construction, Broken Arrow Golf Club was designed by Bob Lohmann and has been owned and operated by the Chen family since its inception in 1995. Located just west of Interstate 355 in Lockport, Illinois, this 27 hole facility has a North, South, and East course that offers you three separate par-36 combinations. Each links style design has four sets of tees, rolling fairways, water hazards, and recently resurfaced cartpaths. Two years ago all of the bunkers were renovated and new sand was installed to create an intimidating yet aesthetic view of each hole. The North Course debuted in 1996 and has a unique trait where each hole features a double green with two separate hole locations that gives golfers the option of playing to a red flag or a blue flag. The installation of a GPS system on the carts in 2008 aims to aid golfers with yardages that will help maintain a consistent speed of play. Broken Arrow offers a state of the art driving range and practice facility with PGA Professional Michael Camastro giving lessons.

Not only do the Chen’s own Broken Arrow, but they also manage a course just outside of Shanghai, China where Agie flies back once a month to check on operations. Maintaining a balance between employee and family member at Broken Arrow can be challenging, but the Chen’s have found that their system works, as Agie oversees all of the business operations, his wife Sue handles the administrative duties, and his son Michael is the Golf Operations Manager. Agie’s daughter Tina used to drive the beverage cart before moving on to a different career. Broken Arrow’s clubhouse offers a full service banquet facility for hosting meetings, weddings, bridal showers, and golf outings. Michael Chen explains that, “One of our biggest events each June is the Philippines Independence Day outing. We usually have around 225 golfers participate, and it’s a great way to celebrate the country’s history and heritage by having fun on the golf course with friends and family.” Meandering through a neighborhood, Broken Arrow is a convenient place to live and be able to walk out your front door right onto the first tee. “We enjoy being an integral part of the community and hope that our course only adds value to living in Lockport.” Broken Arrow is currently the home course of two area high schools while also serving as a host course for the IHSA Sectional and Regional Finals.

Mistwood Golf Club

If the season series between the Cubs and White Sox left fans disappointed in their teams performance on the diamond, the opportunity to settle the score awaits, as the Crosstown Golf Classic is held each year at Mistwood Golf Club where fans tee it up against their rivals. Originally established in 1998 on an abandoned quarry in Romeoville, Illinois, Mistwood has been owned by Jim McWethy since 2003. With five holes bordering a gorgeous 67 acre lake, this Ray Hearn design showcases wooded terrain, split fairways, and terraced greens. Worthy of hosting the Phil Kossin Illinois Women's Open for the past 11 years, Mistwood is currently rated 4 ½ stars by Golf Digest, and will defy your long game as well as your short game. Since McWethy took ownership, the course has seen multiple improvements as every bunker was re-built, new tee boxes were installed, and a brand new Scottish style clubhouse is set to be constructed in the near future. Mistwood boasts a thriving junior golf program that provides a fun curriculum for young golfers and also hosts IJGA and MAJGT events. McWethy states that, "Our goal is to become one of the top 5 public courses in the Chicago area and I think that these constant improvements will bring us closer to achieving that goal."

McWethy grew up learning the game from his father and became good enough to earn a spot on the golf team at Cornell College in Iowa. After graduating with a degree in Economics, he worked his way up the ranks at his grandfather's company Berry Bearing, and went on to become its Chief Financial Officer. Originally a partial investor during the construction of Mistwood, McWethy took sole ownership of the course after the original owners experienced financial difficulties in 2002. "I would not have tried to salvage the golf course if Andy Krajewski, Dan Phillips, and Visanu Tongwarin wouldn't have come back to work with me. It's quite a challenge to run your own golf course, but Andy is a very experienced General Manager and I couldn't ask for better PGA Professionals than Dan and Visanu. Working with great people makes owning a golf course very fun and rewarding." An 18 acre practice facility, championship putting green, and spectacular restaurant with a versatile menu will only add to your enjoyment of this up and coming treasure. Golfers beware of the seven foot sod wall bunker fronting the green on the par 4 12th...it has been known to dismantle good rounds.

Silver Lake Country Club

The opportunity to experience a traditional Chicago golf course awaits you at Silver Lake Country Club. Located 6 miles west of Interstate 294 and 5 miles north of Interstate 80, this Orland Park treasure features two classic 18 hole layouts, the North and South courses along with a 9 hole executive course named Rolling Hills that was recently voted Chicagoland's favorite executive course. The South Course is a par-70 layout that measures just over 6,300 yards with water bordering seven holes, while the North Course is a 6,800 yard par-72 that showcases a trio of long par 4's. Both courses have expansive undulating greens, tree-lined fairways, and rebuilt bunkers that will provide the ultimate test of golf. The challenging Rolling Hills course is comprised of two short par 4's and seven par 3's. After the original clubhouse burned down in 1957, Silver Lake built a state-of-the-art clubhouse that features a fully stocked pro shop, bar and grill, and a 400 person banquet room that can be used for weddings, showers, and parties. Not only will you enjoy a stress-free round of golf and a fine dining experience at Silver Lake, but you can also play racquetball and wallyball, get a massage, and take a personal training session. You would not realize this because of Silver Lake's updated amenities, but this golf club has plenty of history with ties to another course on our "Family Owned Golf Courses" list.

Working as electricians to pay the bills after World War I ended, the three Coghill brothers Marty, Jack, and Bert, fell in love with the game and decided to build their own golf course. On July 4, 1927, Cog-Hill Golf Club was founded in Lemont, Illinois, and two years later a second 18 hole course was added. The crash of 1929 sunk the U.S. into the Great Depression, but Cog-Hill was able to weather the storm due to the erection of a trolley car that would bring golfers directly to the course from downtown Chicago. In 1938, Bert decided to purchase Silver Lake Golf Club and continued to own and operate both establishments until Jack and Bert's death in the early 1950's. After losing his two brothers, Marty decided to sell Cog-Hill to a former caddy named Joe Jemsek. Bert's son John and his wife Grace inherited Silver Lake and have since passed it down to their family members with youngest brother Bert serving as the Director of Golf Operations. "We pride ourselves on being an established family owned and operated golf course that has a lot of history in the Chicagoland area." As a tribute to the late Payne Stewart, Bert is well known for dressing up in his old fashioned knickers and Irish golf hat. "I started doing it 15 years ago and it caught on. I'm old school and not only do I enjoy the feel of the shirt and tie outfit, but I also play exclusively with hickory shafted clubs." Currently there are nine family members who have a stake in Silver Lake, four of whom still work at the golf club, but make no mistake about it, the next generation of Coghills will continue the family tradition of providing a fun environment to play golf.

Cog Hill Golf & Country Club

Originally owned by the Coghill family since its inception in 1927, Joe Jemsek's acquisition of Cog Hill Golf & Country Club was his American dream that through hard work and persistence eventually came true. During his youth Joe was one of Marty Coghill's favorite caddies and one day while out looping for his boss he made a stern announcement that took Marty by surprise when he said, "I love this place so much that one day I'm going to own it." After becoming the PGA teaching professional at Cog Hill, Joe made a name for himself not only as a long drive champion, but as one of the best golf instructors in Chicago. In 1951 with the help of a loan from Marty, Joe purchased the original #1 and #2 courses from the Coghill family and made the transition from lead instructor to owner and operator. With the addition of the #3 course in 1963 and the completion of the #4 course a year later, Cog Hill had four 18 hole designs that could rival any other large golf facility in the Chicagoland area. Two of the original courses have since been re-routed to form the infamous Dubsdread #4 course that currently hosts the BMW Championship as part of the PGA Tour's FedEx Cup Series. In 2008 Cog Hill hired Rees Jones to redesign the Dubsdread course in which all the bunkers were rebuilt, new rectangular tee boxes were constructed, and all of the hazards were brought back into play off the tee. This essentially transitioned the golf course back to how it played when the players were using persimmon clubs and balata golf balls.

Joe's son Frank recounts the days as a youngster when all the top touring professionals would stop by on their way through town to play at his father's establishment. "Dad was a heck of a player in his own right who not only qualified for the Western Open, but made the cut playing against the Sneads and Middlecoffs of the era. My father would help amateur golfers with their games which in turn neglected his own, but would still go out and give those touring pros a run for their money." Joe's generosity towards others continues even to this day as the previous Western Open and now the BMW Championship raises money for the Evans Scholarship program which helps send caddies to college. Frank explains that, "My Dad never forgot that he was once a caddy, and how tough things were to find work during the Depression, so the Evans Scholarship is our way of giving back to the community and it's an organization we are very proud to support."

The family run business would not operate as smoothly as it does without the help of his daughter Marla who handles the accounting, his son Joe who is a golf course architect that advises during renovations, and his youngest daughter Katherine who serves as President of the club. With Katherine taking more and more of a leadership role in the organization, this allows Frank to do what he loves most. "I enjoy greeting the golfers and letting them know we appreciate their business, because without them my father's dream wouldn't continue to grow." An avid golfer herself Katherine explains that while most amateurs want to play the BMW Championship host Dubsdread course, "Our facility is one of a select few in the country that have two courses ranked on the "Top 100 Courses You Can Play" list. If you want to see how your game stacks up against the best players in the world then the Dubsdread course playing at 7,500 yards from the tips is all you can ask for, but if the everyday amateur isn't looking for as stern of a test, the #2 course is the most enjoyable course out here." Boasting 5 practice putting greens, a short game area, and a heated driving range open all year round, Cog Hill today reflects the man who never forgot what he enjoyed most, helping other golfers become better players.

Odyssey Country Club

Named after the experience you would expect to receive at an upscale golf destination, Odyssey Country Club is the place to enjoy not only a four hour journey of golf, but also some of life's journeys, as it features one of the largest banquet facilities in the Chicagoland area that is capable of hosting multiple events such as wedding receptions, baby showers, and parties. Its 48,000 square foot clubhouse was completed in 1994, and it includes four separate banquet rooms that can hold a combined 1,000 guests. Each banquet room has a cathedral ceiling, tile dance floor, and boat shaped chandeliers made out of crystal, that provide a unique ambiance. During the event, step outside onto the terrace and enjoy a beautiful view of the two finishing holes and the lake that separates them. Within view of the clubhouse, a 40 foot fountain and vibrant flowers provide a romantic backdrop for the wrought iron gazebo that makes Odyssey a perfect place to hold the wedding of your dreams. After viewing the golf course while at an event, you will most certainly develop an itch to come back and bring your clubs.

After winning back-to-back U.S. Opens in 1988 and 1989, Curtis Strange was at the pinnacle of his golf career, but he also had a knack for golf course consulting and when the opportunity presented itself to get his input on the design of Odyssey, the Halikias family couldn't pass it up. Vice President of Operations Nick Halikias explains that, "My Uncle Mike, along with the help of his three brothers, founded Odyssey and their dream was to bring a country club atmosphere to the public golfer of the south suburbs." Construction on Odyssey started in 1989 and by 1991 the course was open for business. Odyssey's 7,100 yard par-72 layout can be quite challenging due to the fact that 17 of the 18 holes have at least one water hazard in play. "Since the course was completed we have not had to build any new tee boxes to increase its length, despite the fact that technology has forced most courses to become longer. Curtis did a great job helping design this course because he knew that even in the early 1990's the golf ball was eventually going to go further and that would force courses to adapt. Luckily, we have never had to do that." Its signature hole is the 526 yard par 5 16th that showcases an island green where longer hitters have to choose between laying up, or going for the green in two. "The front nine is a little bit easier because most of the holes are straight, but on the back nine just about every hole is a dogleg which gives you the option to cut the corner, but that also brings in more of the trouble." Odyssey also has GPS units on the golf carts, a halfway house, and a full driving range to warm up on before hitting the links.

In 1995 the Halikias family decided to open the Odyssey Fun World which is situated on the northwest side of the golf course complex. The Fun World is designed to provide a place for kids to stay active all year long. During the spring and summer months the batting cages, go-karts, and two mini-golf courses attract the local families, while in the winter time the arcade, X-box online games, and laser tag are the most popular with the kids. Located just south of the First Midwest Bank Amphitheatre in Tinley Park, Odyssey Country Club is very accessible from downtown on Interstate 57 as well as Northwest Indiana and Central Illinois by using Interstate 80. It is a stop you certainly don't want to pass up.

Special Note: We at Golf Now! Chicago would like to thank our golf course owners and family members for taking time to meet with us. Interviews were directed by Cheryl Justak, and conducted and written by Eric Peschke.