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**What's Olde
is Now New**
On Lake Greenwood

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BY TRENT BOUTS

OVER DINNER with one of the thousands of swing students he's taught over the years, Shane LeBaron was asked what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. The question was well-intended. The student was also a friend, and at least financially, something of an advisor. Still, the inquiry jarred, just a little.

Barely into his 40s, LeBaron was already at the top of his field as the firmly ensconced director of instruction at Cherry Hills, the famed William Flynn gem and five-time major championship site in Denver. He'd counseled PGA Tour pros on their games, even spent time with them on Tour, and done well at several other vaunted clubs across the country — places like Knollwood in Chicago and Mirabel in Scottsdale.

Out of deference, LeBaron paused before replying gently: "I'm kind of doing it."

"But he's like, 'No. When you're 55, do you really want to stand out there and teach 14 lessons a day?'" LeBaron says now. "I'd never thought about doing anything other than that."

Until that evening. After some thought, LeBaron looked across the table and said: "I'd like some ownership. I'd like to own a place."

In a week or two, LeBaron, now 46, and a small group of partners, will open Olde Eight Club, which he describes as "an exceptionally golf-centric residential development" on Lake Greenwood about 90 minutes northwest of Columbia. The course is a dramatic new take by architect Drew Rogers on the routing of what was formerly The Links at Stoney Point.

The course, now tipping out at 7,400 yards, will star on a billing to also feature a bunkerless, nine-hole short course and a 25,000 sq. ft. putting course, both with lights for night play. The short course will



A look at one of the par 3s that, collectively, Shane LeBaron rates with any in the state.



Shane LeBaron says architect Drew Rogers' changes to what was once The Links at Stoney Point make "beautiful sense."

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— SHANE LEBARON

sit on 250 additional acres where, LeBaron says, "We're building one of the single greatest practice facilities in the country" and a teaching center that will "basically be the East Coast home of Callaway Golf."

Membership, to be capped at 350, will have access to 40 cabins, with some currently under construction. There are plans for 300 new homes in addition to 100 more in the existing residential community. Just five minutes from the front gate, another 750 acres await whatever comes next.

Late last year, one local newspaper account put the overall investment — for what's happening in the meantime — north of \$400 million.

So, it was a good thing that LeBaron's dinner partner, the person who drew out his hitherto latent dream was Mitch Kovitz,

CEO and founder of Kovitz and vice chairman of Focus Financial Partners. "One of the great financial minds in America," LeBaron says of Kovitz. "He's a guy you see on TV ringing the bell to open the New York Stock Exchange."

Another investor in Olde Eight is another of LeBaron's swing clients, former world No. 1 David Duval. After LeBaron made a less-than-ideal site visit where "it rained the whole time" and he came down with food poisoning he was still sufficiently impressed by the possibilities at Stoney Point to urge Duval to take a look for himself.

"I'll be honest, I probably didn't paint the prettiest picture of what it was," LeBaron recalls. "I was so obsessed with what it could be. But David called me from the third hole and said, 'Shane, I'm in! We can really do it

here.' That made me feel really good because, obviously he's seen a thing or two."

What Duval saw in this instance, and the key to the entire project, LeBaron says, was golfing "topography that is second to none." Rogers, the architect, was also enthused. "The palette is strong and the bones are good," he told *Golf Course Architecture*. "What we liked about this property originally was just how well the course was originally envisioned, so the routing does allow for solid variety and distinction."

Roger's comments are a nod to the work of South Carolina's own Tom Jackson, whose version of Stoney Point opened in 1989. What Rogers has wrought is a sweeping overhaul, lending new flesh and features to those old bones. The bunkering is big and bold and many of the Tifeagle greens feature shelves and nooks that toy with the eye as much as they demand precision on the way in. Multiple shot options exist the entire way around the course.

As LeBaron says, "We didn't want a golf course that benefited just the bomber. Nor one that benefited the shorter player, who just pokes it out there in play. We want a course that if both of those players play strategically well, that when they come to 18, they'll be very evenly matched."

What Rogers has done between holes is just as important to the overall experience. Selectively removing trees and thinning dense brush has had a similar effect to moving and removing walls in a renovation of a ranch home from the era of when the course was built. The golf course now feels bigger but more intimate at the same time.

"You want great golf, but you also want a great golf experience, and those two things don't always run side by side," LeBaron says. "It's important to have holes that connect so there is a communication between holes to create drama and that experience." Think Amen Corner, Oakmont, or any number of the great links courses.

Some examples at Olde Eight:

- No. 16 tee box is adjacent and open to No. 15 green and the fairways on No. 10 and No. 18. The stage is ripe for golfers in a tournament such as a member-guest to "be looking at each other, maybe needing each other a little bit," LeBaron says.



This bunker at Olde Eight dwarfs owner Shane LeBaron, and less than half of it is in the picture.

- Setting up a second or third shot to the green on No. 2, a par 5, also has you gazing down “this unbelievable tee shot corridor on No. 3. So, before you’re even on the green on No. 2, you’re thinking about that tee shot coming up.”
- Marking your ball on No. 6 green, “You’ll look over to the green on No. 7 — which is a 10,000 sq. ft. green that doesn’t have one bunker — and beyond that to No. 8 tee box which sits on the lake.”

“I want this course to really separate and have such a strong identity that it leaves that mark with somebody so that they say, ‘You know, I’ve just been somewhere.’ It connects with them as a golfer,” LeBaron says. “The worst thing that can happen is to come in after your round and you’re having your cheeseburger and someone asks how you

played No. 4 and you have to think, ‘Wait, which is No. 4?’

“I would never say *the* greatest because there’s way too many good golf courses in the Carolinas, but I think, collectively, we’ll be at the top of any list of the best par 3s in the Carolinas. They are that good.”

LeBaron may be creating blue blood golf at Olde Eight, but his roots in the game are decidedly blue collar. He grew up in Nebraska where his stepfather was director of golf for the city-owned courses in Lincoln. “The Munis,” LeBaron says. “And I was a grunt.”

As a “grunt,” he “picked the range — by hand, washed the carts, took out the trash, cleaned the toilets, vacuumed the floors.” In between, he’d play golf. “Then wash, rinse and repeat, over and over again,” he says. “That was growing up. I grew up as a public golf course kid. My career took me other

places, but that’s what got me going.”

LeBaron and his wife, Ashley, moved to Hilton Head in 2003. After some time at Moss Creek Plantation, he went to 36-hole Belfair where he stayed until 2014. Simultaneously, he served as director of instruction for USC-Beaufort. Then they moved to Phoenix where “the golf market was bigger” and LeBaron ramped up to a 54-hole property, The Wigwam.

They would be gone for a decade, but LeBaron says their hearts never really left. “I fell in love with the Carolinas,” he says. “I like the South. People complain about the humidity, but I love it. It feels great. It just feels right. It feels like home, and I missed the people.”

One of the people he missed was Lou Miller, whose own stamp on golf in the Carolinas stretches across more than half a century. Miller’s career includes a stint as vice president and director of golf at Pinehurst Resort and reimagining the former Highlands Cove Golf Course into what is now Old Edwards Club in the North Carolina mountains.

“Lou Miller is like a father to me,” LeBaron says, adding that the model at Old Edwards — where, coincidentally, another Tom Jackson design was renovated, as well as a short course added, and a hotel and spa incorporated — sowed seeds for what has played out at Olde Eight, though there is no relation between the two. Instead, the name of the Greenwood development — with the

Tall fescue and gaping bunkers help set the tone and test at Olde Eight.



“e” — draws from South Carolina being the eighth state in the union.

Miller was a member at Belfair and their relationship led to LeBaron and his wife spending summer breaks at Old Edwards, LeBaron doing some teaching and Ashley helping with merchandising. Having worked at many of the facilities where LeBaron has, she is now director of operations at Olde Eight.

“These things don’t happen overnight,” LeBaron says. “What Lou and Art Williams did at Old Edwards, watching what they did sort of inspired this (Olde Eight). At the root of it is golf. Golf is what I do. I don’t know much else. But it was important to me that this club also has a legacy component to it. And you don’t get legacy without families.”

Because not everyone in every family loves golf, LeBaron wanted an environment with options for the non-golfers. Options that are now available such as woodland hiking trails, pickleball, tennis, swimming pools, a lake with boats and jet skis, a fishing center. There is reason for “everyone to want to come here,” he says. “The family is still together. That to me is important, it’s vital.”

Still, it’s clear that it’s the golf course that speaks loudest to LeBaron.

“I had the good fortune of being raised around the business. I’ve seen the good and the bad and everything in between,” he says. “I think I had a pretty good idea of what would be very successful.” So, when another friend suggested he take a look at Stoney Point, it really only took one.

That friend, Bluffton-based Matt Green, has a home on Lake Greenwood and had played the golf course a few times. He is also



This aerial taken this summer shows the first, 10th and 18th holes with the practice putting green in the foreground and what will be a lighted putting course on the right.

president and CEO of Front Light Building Company which is responsible “for everything vertical” at Olde Eight, LeBaron says. “He called me and said, ‘I think I have an idea.’ That idea led to LeBaron arranging a site visit with owner, Jim Medford.

The bad weather and his roiling insides set a grim backdrop for that trip.

“I’m pretty sure Mr. Medford was thinking he was never going to see us again. I’m pretty sure that’s what he thought,” LeBaron says. “But I thought the land the golf course existed on was phenomenal. I fell in love with it, for what it could be.”

What it could be, he now believes, is a site worthy of significant tournament golf along

the lines of a State Amateur Championship and “high end college golf.” “Then we’ll see what else the future has in store. We’ve got some partners, and they’ve got some ideas.”

In addition to caliber of the golf course, LeBaron says its future success is further underpinned by the nature of the ownership group, which also includes director of golf David Engram and head golf professional Alex Applebaum. “That makes us a little bit different from a lot of places,” he says. “This is not a board or a committee place. It’s golfers making golf decisions for golfers. That’s what it is.”

That doesn’t mean there haven’t been meetings, of a kind.

“I mean, we had — I won’t call them arguments — we had conversations between me, the architect and Total Turf (construction company) that went for days about moving a bunker — that was 200 yards out — three feet,” LeBaron says. “When you start doing what we did to a golf course, you wonder are we goofing up the property or accentuating how fantastic it already is?”

“You’re putting all of that into a blender and looking to get something out of it that doesn’t look contrived, doesn’t look like you tried too hard. I think our team did a great job of that, together, in a way that it makes beautiful sense out there.” ■



Shadows help illustrate the degree of slope on parts of a new 25,000 sq. ft. putting course at Olde Eight.