

BEHIND THE CHAMPIONSHIP ROPES IN FRENCH LICK

A PROUD INDIANA TOWN AND STELLAR STAFF PREPARE FOR THE SPOTLIGHT

By *Bob Denney*

IT'S 7:30 P.M. AND A MEETING OF 18 VOLUNTEER CHAIRPERSONS, PREPARING FOR THE ARRIVAL OF THE 43rd PGA Professional National Championship, is just concluding in the basement of The Donald Ross Course Clubhouse in French Lick, Ind. The chairpersons will lead nearly 700 volunteers committed to serving this month's showcase event for PGA Professionals.



On the course, a triangular boys' prep school golf meet is in progress. Nearly 20 parents are huddled in the fading late sunlight on a hill to watch their sons compete.

French Lick Resort PGA Director of Golf Operations Dave Harner, a native of French Lick who also happens to be the varsity golf coach at nearby Springs Valley High School, oversees it today from a golf car. He's got one eye on his BlackBerry, the other eye on a player's tee shot. He also has not missed a beat when a customer or any of some 100 employees need his counsel throughout French Lick Resort.

Harner, 51, could probably have gone elsewhere in the golf industry to find challenges. But he has found more than his fill of daily challenges and rewards in this community of 2,500 to keep him motivated. He has spent 33 years working for the resort, the past 16 in his current position.

"I always thought this place was just full of potential," says Harner, who spent his early years as a musician in a local band and didn't begin playing golf until age 20. "I felt that I could bring something to the table and help make a difference. I love the commitment our ownership has made to golf here and I share that commitment daylight to dark every single day."

Harner doesn't feel that he has to create something out of the ordinary to sell visitors on the ambience of French Lick, June 27-30. The town, the people and the beauty of a Donald Ross original layout and the nearby Pete Dye Course will do the selling.

"We want to showcase not only the Resort and

courses, but our town and community as well," says Harner. "We want to prove that we are indeed worthy and capable of hosting a big event."

Harner says that 10 school buses will shuttle spectators, while two physicians from the French Lick area will operate a mobile emergency hospital on site. If needed, there will be two medical evacuation helicopters poised on the outskirts of town.

While Golf Channel televises the National Championship to millions of viewers, families of the 312 entrants can enjoy a week-long French Lick Street Fest, filled with music, more than 40 food vendors, games, a Play Golf America event, and even an appropriately-themed outdoor movie, "Tin Cup."

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—DAVID HARNER, PGA DIRECTOR OF GOLF OPERATIONS, FRENCH LICK RESORT

"The Street Fest is perfect timing," says Harner. "It's a chance for those attending the Championship to meet the people in this town, and feel the enthusiasm we all share for the tournament and the passion we all have to become a recognized golf destination."

While French Lick is 65 miles from the nearest

Dave Harner has been the PGA director of golf operations at French Lick Resort for 16 years and has spent 33 years in total working at the resort.



major airport, and is often unfairly tagged as “in the middle of nowhere,” Harner has a different view.

“We’re in the middle of everywhere – less than four hours from St. Louis, two hours from Indianapolis, five hours from Chicago, three hours from Cincinnati and only one hour from Louisville. It is a great day-drive getaway, centrally located for millions of people and that makes it more attractive in today’s economy.”

Marking his ninth season as head coach at Springs Valley High School, which spawned NBA Hall of Fame legend Larry Bird, Harner has also seen a rare commitment to golf. Of the school’s 285 students, there were 32 who tried out for golf this season – or one out of every eight.

“We don’t make cuts, the players qualify and we keep the entire group all spring so they have the opportunity to play, practice and improve. It’s as much about changing a culture as anything, and I’m proud to say that we have never had a losing season,” says Harner. “And last year we advanced out of our sectional for the first time in 48 years. These kids love the game.”

The ability to elevate one’s career in the industry despite not finishing college, is a rarity in business today. “My route is certainly not the route I would recommend for young people who want to get in the golf business today,” he says.

For Harner, having been trained at the resort under two longtime PGA Professionals – the late Fred Wampler, who was NCAA Champion at Purdue University, and winner of the Los Angeles Open in 1954, and Alfred “Bud” Timbrook – gave him invaluable experience.

“I had a lot of respect for those gentlemen, they both spent time with me, granted I learned the hard way and took the longest route to becoming a PGA Professional, but the time spent under their wing helped me appreciate what it is to be a PGA Professional,” says Harner.

One member of the gallery on the hill this day at The Donald Ross Course is Lisa Harner, who is preparing to serve on a Championship transportation committee.

“When I met my wife she understood the long hours that go with working in golf,” Harner says. “We’ve been together for 24 years.”

The couple has a son, Thomas, who was the No. 2 player for four years on Springs Valley’s



Left to right: Assistant Superintendent Brett Fleck; Superintendent Russ Apple; Superintendent John Parker; Assistant Golf Professional Andy Fortner; Assistant Golf Professional Adam Marshall; PGA Director of Golf Operations Dave Harner; Assistant Golf Professional Alex Whiteman; Assistant Golf Professional Deven Trueblood; Assistant Golf Professional Kevin Johnson; and PGA Head Professional Jan Tellstrom.

team before heading to Indiana University, where he just completed his freshman year and has chosen biology as his major.

Harner is proud that his son was an Evans Scholarship recipient, learning the game through caddieing and a product of a newly-initiated caddie program that involves over 100 youths from the community once school has closed its doors for the summer.

“French Lick is a community of hard-working people who care,” Harner says. “Both of Larry Bird’s high school basketball coaches help us out. Jim Jones, formerly of Terre Haute South, works as part-time cart attendant at the Valley Links Golf Course. Gary Holland, who coached Bird in his senior year, mows fairways at The Pete Dye Course.”

“This project has not been about ego; it is from the heart.”

The golf meet is about to finish, and Harner is not about to slow down.

“Really, our business is about changing lives, we get so many opportunities to influence people in a very positive way,” Harner says. “PGA Professionals have a lot of success stories that don’t get publicized. The game has been so good to so many people, especially me. I’m very excited about bringing this Championship to French Lick. I know that everyone here will do everything possible to make it an unforgettable experience.” ■

Bob Denney is The PGA of America’s senior association writer.

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