

# Personal Paradise

Jerry Rich set out to create a golf club that would be unlike any other, and the result was Rich Harvest Farms

By Ed Sherman

Let's say you were passionate about golf and you had no money concerns. What would you do?

You probably would do what Jerry Rich did. You would build a world-class golf course outside the front door on your property in Sugar Grove. The layout would feature lakes, streams, trees, mounds, fescue, quick greens and well-manicured bunkers. Of course, you would design it yourself (with a little help), because that's a big part of the fun.

Then you would hire a staff to make sure that not a blade of grass was out of place. People might say the conditioning at your course is comparable to acclaimed Augusta (Ga.) National Golf Club, which just happens to be your favorite course in the world. For good measure, you would design the locker room to look like Augusta National's.

You've got to practice, right? Not only do you have a state-of-the-art range on your property, but you also constructed an indoor facility including a contoured green that has the ball



PHOTOS BY JEFF HAVNES

rolling like—what else?—Augusta.

The end result is Rich Harvest Farms, Jerry Rich's very own golf Shangri-La.

"That's the way I view it," Rich said. "You've got everything you would ever want here."

Rich's course, out in the quiet of Sugar Grove, now has one more thing: a top international competition.

The Solheim Cup, the women's equivalent of the Ryder Cup, will be held at Rich Harvest Farms in August. The matches

between the top U.S. players and their European counterparts will feature stars such as Paula Creamer, Cristie Kerr, Natalie Gulbis and perhaps Michelle Wie.

"It's an overwhelming feeling," said Rich, 71, of hosting the event.

Unbelievable might be the better word, according to Beth Daniel, the captain of the 2009 U.S. team.

"It's really an unbelievable story," said Daniel, a member of the LPGA Hall of Fame. "I try to tell people, 'You don't



The sixth hole on the Silver nine at Rich Harvest Farms

understand. This is this guy's property. He lives on the property.' And he landed this big international event. That doesn't happen every day."

Rich, though, isn't your everyday person. He always thought big, which is one of the reasons he wound up with a golf course in his backyard.

After graduating from Northern Illinois University, Rich joined his father's communication business, which provided sound systems for schools and hospitals. The company was an early pioneer in integrating computers.

Rich hit the jackpot in the 1970s when a friend took him into the back room of the trading floor at Chase Manhattan in New York. He saw all the computers, and he says the idea of integrating them "hit me like a shot right between the eyes."

"These are things we'd been doing for four, five years," Rich explained. "I remember thinking to myself, 'I wonder why nobody else thought about this?'"

Soon, Rich was walking up and down Wall Street, signing up customers. The company went worldwide and Rich eventually sold it to Reuters for millions in 1984.

It was around that time that Rich, an avid low-handicap golfer, made his first visit to Augusta National. He fell in love with the place and wanted to join on the spot. Admittedly naïve to the process, he realized he probably wasn't going to get his members' green jacket any time soon.

So he went home and told his wife, Betty Ann, "I'm going to build my own Augusta."

"I always had an interest in golf course design," Rich said. "I'd always take scorecards and doodle on them. If I saw an interesting green complex, I would doodle it. I never knew what I would do with this information."

Rich first designed three holes. Then he added another three holes, implemented multiple tee boxes and multiple hole locations on the greens so the hole could be played in different ways.

Rich, though, had bigger plans. He needed 18 holes in order to build a truly special course. With the assistance of Batavia architect Greg Martin, the finished product landed Rich Harvest fifth on a 1999 ranking in *Golf Digest* listing the year's best new private courses. The course first cracked the magazine's top 100 courses in America in 2002, checking in at 99. It rose steadily from there to the high 40s. (The course currently is not included on the most recent top-100 lists published by *Golfweek* or *Golf Magazine*.)

Rich's fingerprints literally are on every aspect of the course. Like Augusta, the conditioning is outstanding for the small number of members—an estimated 50-60—and their guests. Your kitchen floor should be so immaculate.

It just so happens Rich also is a perfectionist. Mike Regan, who was among the club's first members, is amazed at Rich's attention to detail.

"I once heard a guy say, 'Let excellence be your signature,'" Regan said. "Jerry is the model for that. Jerry doesn't do anything halfway. He wants everything to be the best."

The best also could mean the toughest. Since Rich is a strong player, he wanted a strong course. The back tees stretch to 7,631 yards with a course rating of 78.5.

Regan recalled the time he invited a guest, an 8 handicap, to play the course. Regan tried to convince him to play from the shorter tees, but the player wanted more of a test.

"He wound up shooting a 104," Regan said, "and didn't shake my hand after the round."

Fortunately for the top women professionals, they won't play

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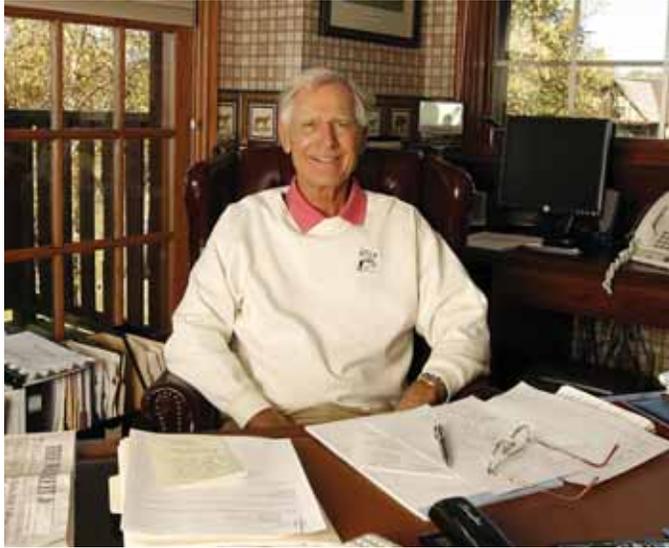


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In August, all of the interest and international attention that comes with the Solheim Cup will land not far from Jerry Rich's office, which is on-site at Rich Harvest Farms.

the Solheim Cup from the tips. Still, it will be plenty tough.

Rich has dedicated himself and his staff to throwing all their energies into the Solheim Cup. He built a 10-cottage lodge to house both teams on site. All of the players definitely will check

out Rich's 50,000-square-foot display of his car collection, regarded as one of the best in the world. Rich said his collection began in 1969 with a Mercedes Roadster 300SL. Now he has 80 cars, ranging from a 1954 Corvette to a 1932 Cadillac V16. He has a 1934 Duesenberg Town Car that looks like it is right out of old-time Hollywood.

"I told our team, 'You're going to go there for a week and want to stay for a lifetime. You won't want to leave,'" Daniel said. "Jerry is so passionate about this. By doing all these things, he is making a strong statement about the kind of event he wants to have."

Rich sees the Solheim Cup as the culmination for Rich Harvest Farms. The building of his golf Shangri-La required more than 20 years of hard work. All the money in the world didn't just make it happen. You can't put a price tag on vision and passion, and Rich has cornered the market on those commodities, too.

Now his dream will be on display for the entire world to see, and Rich hardly is able to wait for that opportunity.

"When the event finally gets here, I'm going to be part of everything going on," Rich said. "I'm going to enjoy it." 🍷

*Ed Sherman is a recently retired golf writer for the Chicago Tribune. He also writes a sports business and weekly golf blog for Crain's Chicago Business.*

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