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Sports

Sanders enjoying his 20th golf season at Great River Golf Course

By Doug Endres, Staff writer
Tuesday, July 28, 2009 5:24 PM CDT

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Steve Sanders is in the middle of his 20th golf season of selling fun at Great River Road Golf Course.

Sanders bought Great River Road Golf Course near Nauvoo on Oct. 25, 1989, from the Dorsey Tinsley Estate. He had made the trip down from Peoria to attend the Grape Festival.

"I was working for a company that was looking to purchase public golf courses that were undervalued. The price on this one was low enough that I decided to do it myself," said Sanders.



Great River Road Golf Course owner Steve Sanders stands behind a sign that has relayed a message of being positive all summer. Sanders credits his attitude for his success.

Sanders had a background in golf, playing at Marquette High School, which included one meet at Great River Road Golf Course against Nauvoo-Colusa, and in college. He planned to attend Western Illinois University in Macomb and earn a masters degree in professional sports management. He ended up taking a job in the Lake Geneva, Wis., area and has stayed in the golf business ever since.

He worked in Florida, Indianapolis and in Peoria before buying the course.

"I have a diverse background in the golf business," said Sanders. "I've worked with good people in good systems."

"I saw an upside to where we were. Then there was a need for more golf. When I built the driving range, there wasn't another one in Hancock County. There was not another 18 hole golf course in the county when I expanded here."

Sanders built the back nine in 1993.

"Since then, within an hour of here, there has been 144 more golf holes built while the population has decreased," said Sanders. "The National Golf Foundation recommends 1,500 people per every public golf hole per 15 mile radius. We're at 220 people now within 60 miles of here. We're 700 percent higher than what's recommended."

In the late 1990s, Sanders began aggressively marketing his golf course and the area through his website, golfnauvoo.com.

"I decided to diversify and bring people in from other areas as our saturation point kept growing," he said. "I do more internet sales and more outside play. I've spent \$400,000 marketing the website. I'm constantly trying to create new opportunities."


The website includes a listing of area attractions and things to do within one hour of the golf course.


"It helps bring people in. I'm not just marketing Great River Road Golf Course, I'm marketing the area."

"I love sending people to the villages in Van Buren County because it's unique. It's a place people can spend the day at. If I just promoted Illinois, it would be difficult."

Sanders also has condos on site with 76 beds for guests. It helps bring people to the golf course for weekend getaways.

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"This weekend (July 25), I have 72 beds full. They've usually been full every weekend since about the last weekend in March. Those people are going out and spending money here, eating meals in the area. I contributed close to \$1 million to the economy last year.

"There are 33 million people within 300 miles of Nauvoo. For comparison, Wisconsin Dells has less, but they have close to 10,000 hotel rooms within 300 miles of it. This area missed the tourism growth."

Sanders believes his attitude is a big key to his success.

"Donald Trump said if you're passionate about your business, you will separate yourself from other small business owners. I want people who come here to leave their problems at home. It's not easy. I really believe that attitude is huge."

Great River Road Golf Course was named one of the top 25 fun things to do in Illinois a few years ago.

"I still don't know how I got on that list," said Sanders. "I was at No. 11, and Wrigley Field was at No. 9. I've had some customers compare coming here to tailgating at Lambeau Field."

Sanders believes his continued success depends on his ability to sell fun.

"I'm in the business of recreation. There's a lot of stress in the world. It's about coming here and having fun. That's what it's all about. My job is to sell fun.

"For me to succeed, I need to do the things I've done for the past 20 years. I have to maintain my passion."

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