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CENTERPIECE

HOT

Valley Golf Lounge turns Old Town into a swinging place

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star

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Valley Golf Lounge owner Chris Brown tees off in one of three bays of virtual indoor golf at his recently opened Valley Golf Lounge at 222 S. Loudoun St. in downtown Winchester. Customers can choose from 2,500 courses to play. There are also driving ranges and putting greens. A pro shop is planned with a December opening and a kitchen and bar coming soon.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star

Downtown Winchester has become a hot spot for swingers (of golf clubs), thanks to this month's opening of Valley Golf Lounge at 222 S. Loudoun St.

Anyone who wants to swing a club can check out the new business that allows people to play virtual versions of hundreds of golf courses, ranging from a rendition of the actual Augusta National in Georgia to fantastical Star Wars-themed links in a galaxy far, far away.

Owner Chris Brown, a Winchester native who graduated from Handley High School in 2011, said he has always enjoyed playing golf, a sport that was introduced to him by his grandparents, Janet and Roy A. "Buzzy" Cather Jr. When you walk into Brown's new business, the first thing you'll see is a golf cart that belonged to his grandfather before he died in Florida on March 1 at the age of 92.

"I had to get a little something to put up in his memory because they were a big inspiration," Brown said on Tuesday morning.

After graduating from Handley, Brown studied a variety of topics at Lord Fairfax (now Laurel Ridge) Community College and West Virginia University, none of which involved running a business. Regardless, he began to dream about running his own company.

"That's one of those big check marks on goals for life, to be able to have a place that I can invite people to come and enjoy," Brown said.

The dream of entrepreneurship stayed with him as he worked as a manager of Backroom Brewery near Middletown, then as a mortgage loan officer in Winchester. After marrying his wife, Megan Martin, in 2019 and starting a family, Brown felt particularly compelled to make his dream come true for the sake of their children: Elizabeth, 4, and James, 2.

"I really wanted to do something for myself ... that would leave a legacy, something that my kids could look at and go, 'Holy cow, look at what has been built for our family,'" he said. "Sitting at a desk every day wasn't something that I wanted to do."

Over the years, Brown said he visited a few golf simulator businesses "and they were always really cool. That whole concept just resonated with me."

He eventually realized that no such business existed in the Winchester area, so he decided to start his own, Valley Golf Lounge.

Brown's new venture includes three indoor bays where customers can hit a golf ball into a large cloth screen that displays either real or imaginary courses. High-definition cameras track the swing and the velocity and direction of the golf ball to determine where the ball would land on the course.

The technology is so advanced that an individual or group can play an entire 18-hole course just as if they were doing it for real.

"One of the courses that you can load up here is Jurassic Par 3," he said. " You tee up and you're right in front of the big Jurassic Park sign and a T-Rex walks in front of you."

Brown, with the assistance of his wife, developed a 35-page business plan and found a great location to lease downtown, so he went to Rouss City Hall to see if the property needed to be rezoned to accommodate his ambitions.

"They were like, 'We've got no idea how to even zone you for this,'" Brown recalled, because Winchester has never had a business like Valley Golf Lounge. "We sat down and they were great. They figured it out."

Brown moved into the storefront at 222 S. Loudoun St. in November with a goal of opening in January. However, permits and permissions and other bureaucratic requirements forced him to postpone that date.

Brown spent a total of eight months getting everything ready at Valley Golf Lounge. He installed the three bays, the golf simulator equipment and two new bathrooms, made the property compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act and built almost everything in the business himself, including the upholstered sofas where players can relax and chat.

"The only things I personally did not do were install the exit signs and run the plumbing for the bathrooms and the sinks," Brown said.

He also prepared an area for a lounge that will serve hamburgers, hot dogs, adult beverages and more when it opens in about two months, and a room where he will eventually set up a pro shop where people can buy golfing accessories. When the pro shop opens, he said it will be stocked with as many locally made items as possible.

While preparing for Valley Golf Lounge's official opening, Brown invited members of the Sherando High School golf team to come in and try out the equipment and customization options that can be adjusted to accommodate players of all skill sets.

"It was really rewarding and they gave me some great feedback that allowed me to make some changes," Brown said.

Also during the downtime, Brown received guidance from the [Laurel Ridge Small Business Development Center](#) in Middletown and launched a Kickstarter campaign asking individuals to donate money to help him get Valley Golf Lounge off the ground. He raised more than \$15,000, and his donors were rewarded with an invitation to come in and try out the new business before it opened to the public on July 9.

Bay rentals at Valley Golf Lounge cost \$35 or \$45 per hour (depending on the day and time), and Brown said an individual can get through an entire 18-hole course in about an hour and 15 minutes because they don't have to walk from hole to hole. Each bay can accommodate up to four players for one rental fee, so Brown said Valley Golf Lounge is an affordable place for people of all ages to have fun while improving their skills or learning how to play.

You don't have to wear colorful golf clothes while playing because customers are encouraged to come as they are. It is recommended that players bring their own golf clubs, but if they don't have any, that's fine. Brown said they can rent his in-house clubs.

Walk-ins are welcome anytime a bay is open, but with Valley Golf Lounge already becoming a popular place, Brown recommends reserving a bay in advance through his website, valleygolflounge.com.

"This past Saturday, from 10 o'clock until 6 [in the evening], I had all three bays filled," he said. "It was one of those moments everybody talks about when you're in business and all the puzzle pieces fall in line."

Valley Golf Lounge allows Brown to be the entrepreneur he always dreamed of being while still giving him enough free time to be a good father and husband. He wants his business to succeed, of course, but money is not his main motivating factor.

"If I'm getting bills paid and people in my life are happy," Brown said, "that's my ultimate goal."

Valley Golf Lounge is open 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. To learn more about its bay rental fees and membership plans, and to reserve bays for individuals or groups, visit valleygolflounge.com.

— Contact Brian Brehm at bbrehm@winchesterstar.com

Brian Brehm
Reporter

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