

# Mike Biber Takes Over The Otsego Club

By Jack Berry

In all the years that I've interviewed people, I've never met anyone like Mike Biber who seemingly almost overnight has become a major figure in Michigan golf with eight courses stretching from Kalamazoo to the newest addition, the historic Otsego Club in Gaylord.

Biber summed up our lunch meeting at The Capital Grille in Troy with an e-mail two days later:

thanks for the good time  
laugh too much  
talk too much  
work too hard  
talk about families too much  
too much good food  
then back to work  
not a bad combination  
like what we do

Like what he's done is build a company, Osprey S.A. Ltd., that manages nearly five million square feet of space in suburban office buildings, medical office buildings and industrial and warehouse space in Florida, Texas, North Carolina and Michigan.

Biber said that recreation is only five percent of Osprey's business but, like the bird it's named for, it spreads big wings. It started small, with "player-friendly" par 71 Ridgeview in the 1970s in Kalamazoo.



Mike Biber

"It cost \$200,000 back then and we put \$12,000 down. It was all the money we had."

Golf is in Biber's blood. His father, Walter, was pro in Lansing, Sault Ste. Marie, Jackson and finally at Kalamazoo Country Club. Biber said his father, Ron LaParl of Battle Creek Country Club and the late Reggie Myles Jr. of the Country Club of Lansing were compatriots.

"I started working in the pro shop in Kalamazoo when I was five or six. My dad had me painting the bag room. He emphasized junior golf and started caddy scholarships. He was an innovator. He was the first to have carts and then he almost got fired for putting women's clothing in the golf shop."

In later years when Ridgeview became available, Biber and his brother and sister bought it. It is described as "an excellent choice for senior players, families and kids wanting to play the game at a relaxed pace."

With the late December acquisition of the Otsego Club, Osprey has the blueblood of Michigan resorts, originally the private rustic hideaway where the Fords and the Briggs and the Durants skied and played golf.

In between, Biber and his partners collected The Medalist, a demanding 18 hole course by Bill Newcomb in Marshall, Manistee National's two courses, Cutter's Ridge by Jerry Matthews and Canthooke Valley by Gary Pulsipher (you can hook – the name comes from a lumberjack's tool) and Wilderness Valley's two courses near Mancelona, the first a nice relaxed 18 by longtime Oakland Hills professional Al Watrous, and brawny Black Forest, one of Tom Doak's early designs.

"Tom agreed to finish Black Forest for us – He said it's the toughest course he ever designed. And he agreed to look at Manistee. I'd also like to encourage him to redesign the Classic (Otsego's first course by William Diddle)."

Nothing was set on a date at the time of this writing. Biber is hoping that since the courses are close to Doak's Traverse City home

# *Golf in Ireland...*



## *Where Heaven & Earth Meet*

- \* Home to Ryder Cup in 2006
- \* 250,000 Golfers Visit Ireland annually for Golf
- \* Best Established Golf Destination Winner
- \* Three Links Courses in Worlds Top Ten
- \* A Landmark of Hospitality & Home to Guinness!



**For More Information Visit <http://www.sullivangolf.ie> or  
Call 011 353 69 77377**



### The Lodge at the Otsego Club

they'll be tempting, just a short drive instead of plane trips to the far-flung properties he's worked on since becoming one of the most in-demand designers in golf.

Biber's timing for expanding Osprey's recreational properties – he was high bidder for Keith Gornick's Otsego Club – might seem strange in view of the struggles in the Michigan market with the downsizing of the automobile industry.

"I'm a contrarian. I think Michigan is coming back. We're Michiganders," Biber said of his family and his Brighton-based

company.

Biber said when he and three partners started the company seven years ago as a private investment company, all of the properties they invested in were in Michigan.

"My job was to diversify and now we're in Florida, Texas and North Carolina and less than one-third of our business is in Michigan. It's easy to lease 100 percent in Houston, Tampa and Charlotte but not in Detroit. But we have 1.5 million square feet in Detroit and it's fully leased.

"Everybody criticizes Detroit but we think it's on the rebound

and the automobile companies are working hard. It's a gamble for us. You take what the market god gives you and there are good prices in Detroit right now," Biber said.

"We have a good team with good young people and we hope to build the company for their grand-kids.

"Golf is a tough business in a tough economy in a tough state. We're making money but not a lot of money. You've got to manage it hard and give good value. When you buy low, you better have a lot of capital. You better be in the business. It better not be a hobby. I

didn't buy a ski hill (Otsego) because I love to ski. I haven't skied in five years."

Osprey's plan for Otsego, which Detroit steel magnate Don McLouth opened in 1939, is renovating all of the cabins and lodge and constructing a first class snowboarding area. Michigan never can match the Rockies for ski terrain but you don't need a 14,000-foot mountain for boarding.

The Gornick family, Keith and his father, Alan, before him, made "the Club" a family area for the half century they operated it. Biber said he used to take his family there but over the years, as the youngsters got bigger but the hill didn't, they lost interest in skiing. Boarding has brought them back and Biber said "Keith and his family have meant a lot to Michigan families and we hope to carry on that tradition. Otsego is a little gem that we hope to take to the next level."

Biber expects the combination of Doak's Black Forest, just a short drive south of Gaylord, and Otsego's Tribute course with its spectacular views over the Sturgeon River Valley, to help fill the resort's 100 rooms.

As for neighborhood competitor Treetops, only a few miles east of Otsego,

Biber said "Thank God for Rick Smith and Treetops. There's 100,000 potential customers driving right past my place." And he likes Arcadia Bluffs, Smith's award-winning design just north of Osprey's two courses at Manistee National.

"They've been wonderful to us," Biber said. "We had a wind shear that took out 500 trees and they were the first to call us and offer us help. The best thing that could happen to us was to be near them."

There's method to that madness too. Manistee has rooms, Arcadia doesn't. Golfers can stay and play Manistee and drive on up to Arcadia to play there.

"Four years ago I was asked what is the best course in the area. I said Crystal Downs is first and it would probably cost \$600 if you could get on it. Arcadia Bluffs is next and it's \$180. We charge \$60 and I said 'When you're done, tell me which one you enjoyed the most.'"

Biber obviously enjoys what he's doing and where he's doing it. He cancelled a meeting in Florida because he didn't want to miss the first snowfall in Michigan.

"Now if it was the 50th snow..." he said, laughing all the way. **MG**

# Osprey

By Jack Berry

**W**hat's in a name? The umbrella name of six Michigan golf properties and a private real estate trust based in Brighton came when Mike Biber had a small home in Osprey, Fla., a town of 4,000 on the Gulf of Mexico, south of Sarasota.

"I bought a little bitty property there and I needed a name for it. I thought of a couple names and was told they weren't available," Biber said. "So I said Osprey. They said that wasn't available so I said Osprey SA Ltd. I was buying a company in Spain at the time and SA is company designation and stands for Sociedad Anonima."

And what is an osprey? Ospreys are large raptors with a wingspread of 4-1/2 to 6 feet. They plunge feet first into the water for fish. They're not only in Florida and up the east coast but also in northern Michigan waters.

Looking for a picture of an osprey for the company logo, Biber said a friend showed him the back of a Canadian \$20 bill. An osprey. **MG**