Mountain Lakes Classic set to tee off

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SENECA — With professional golfers from across the globe having already descended upon Seneca earlier in the week, the National Golf Association Tour has officially rolled into town as Cross Creek Plantation prepares to host the Mountain Lakes Classic beginning Thursday morning.

All that's left prior to the first 8 a.m. tee time is today's pro-am tournament, weather permitting, and Mark Ernst, the PGA professional and Director of Golf Operations at Cross Creek, said the course is ready to go for the tournament, which will run through Sunday.

"Everything is kind of coming along as scheduled," Ernst said. "The golf course is pretty well in the tournament condition we're looking for. It's playing pretty firm and fast, and the greens have moderate speed to them."

The tournament will begin with 162 professionals in the field from all over the world, including players from China, England, New Zealand and Scotland, while the United States has a heavy representation as well.

Numerous college All-Americans will be in the field along with players who have played on both the PGA and Nationwide tours, while Seneca native Drew Ernst — Mark's son and the brother of 2011 NCAA individual women's champion Austin Ernst of LSU — will also be in the field after a successful collegiate career at Coastal Carolina.

"It's a very diverse field with guys from literally all over the world," Ernst said. "There's a lot of former NCAA All-Americans who are playing in the tournament, and there's a lot of really, really good players that are going to be there.

"And with Drew, he's obviously played more rounds than anybody else here, so he's got a little experience and knowledge."

The par-72 course, which plays at 6,846 yards has hosted numerous major tournaments in the past, including an event on the Hooters Tour — the previous incarnation of the NGA Tour — in 2004, the South Carolina Open in both 1997 and 2009, and a U.S. Open qualifier event in 2008.

The event is expected to pump $200,000 into the local economy, while a portion of the proceeds will go to the Oconee Medical Center Foundation.

The winner of the event is set to take home a purse of approximately $25,000.

Tee times will range from 7:30 a.m. through 2:09 p.m. on Thursday and Friday, then from 8 a.m. through 9:52 a.m. after the cut on Saturday and Sunday.

Admission to the event is free.

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