



No. 18 at The Abaco Club sits on a point bordered by Winding Bay (top) and the Atlantic Ocean.

COURTESY OF THE ABACO CLUB

MAKING THE TURN

Partnership between Southworth Development, members spurs a revival at The Abaco Club

by Martin Kaufmann

ABACO, BAHAMAS

It's a Wednesday at The Abaco Club, which means that it's rib night at Buster's, the beachside bar along Winding Bay where a local rake-and-scrape performer is putting his unique spin on old pop standards.

Residents, who might see one another here only a few weeks a year, share drinks and laughs like old college friends. Before the night is done, Thomas Aiken, a three-time winner on the European Tour, will be coaxed by a staffer to join in the chorus to "Proud Mary."

The good vibe at Abaco is a welcome change. Only 18 months ago, 30 members filed suit against former owners Marriott Vacations Worldwide and The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co., alleging, among other issues, that the club was not being maintained to the standards that were expected.

"Marriott bought it, and it was square peg, round hole. It's as simple as that," said Michael McCormick,

leader of the ownership group that brought the lawsuit.

Now McCormick likes the direction the club is headed. Sitting on the beach the afternoon following rib night, awaiting the arrival of nine family members, he pointed to the strip of land that runs along Winding Bay.

"Probably half of those homes were for sale. Now, none are," said McCormick, who owns one of those bayside homes.

The turning point came late last year, when Massachusetts-based Southworth Development partnered with some of the homeowners to buy the club. David Southworth, the company's president, said his firm is in the process of spending \$14 million to upgrade the golf course, practice area, restaurants and roads. The company also is close to announcing plans for a marina, and hopes to start construction on a clubhouse next to Buster's in two years.

Southworth first visited The

Abaco Club in January 2013, early in a lengthy feeling-out process, as Southworth pondered an investment. While having dinner with residents during that visit, Southworth recalled residents talking about how important the club had become to their families. "I recalled thinking, *If we can't buy this, I want to live here,*" he said.

It's not difficult to see why. The club has 2½ miles of shoreline, and placid Winding Bay, where a beachcomber can walk out several hundred feet and still be in waist-high water, is ideal for families. Abaco is famous for its bonefishing, and McCormick likes to take his boat island-hopping in the Sea of Abaco.

Aiken joined despite the Marriott kerfuffle, reasoning that, "If something good doesn't happen here, it's never going to happen anywhere."

Work already has begun on Abaco's course and practice area. The course is ranked No. 8 among Golfweek's Best Courses of the Caribbean and Mexico, best among Bahamian courses. Much of the work on the course involves turf maintenance, though a couple of unruly greens also will be tamed.

"The next 18 months are going to be an exciting time," McCormick said. **Gwk**