

# ARE YOU FULLY EXTENDED?

by FRED HAWTREE

**In the hinterland of Sleazeville-on-Sea where I have my holiday cottage, Golphin, there is an excellent nine hole course though, regrettably, it announces itself in the landscape by thin rows of cypress. One wishes Mr. Lawson had never introduced them into his Edinburgh nurseries.**

When the club heard, some months ago, that the neighbouring estate was to be auctioned, there was considerable excitement. If they could extract 50 acres or so, they might finally realise their perennial dream of extending to 18 holes. In 1928, the committee had refused an offer of a similar area for a modest £500, believing that 9 holes were plenty for 72 members.

All subsequent committees agreed that this refusal had been short-sighted. One can only concur. It is axiomatic that any land connecting with golf course boundaries should be snapped up even if it is superfluous to present needs. The club will surmount such hurdles with the greater comfort, the greater the area available to expand elsewhere. A nine hole course will feel obliged, still more strongly, to go to all lengths to acquire more ground. Even if it is small now, another piece may become available one day and enable the magic 50-60 acres to be put together to achieve the transition to the Senior League.

Apart from extending or meeting future problems, it is always good to have control over what happens next to the course. Houses may otherwise be built or public access provided in fields alongside a hole running close to the boundary. It is then no argument to point out that the golf course has been there 100 years and members have always had the right to climb the fence and retrieve their golf balls. There is an absolute duty not to cause injury or damage outside the course boundaries whatever may be the situation inside them. Then there are occasional needs, car parking for a pro-am., a turf nursery, a tree nursery; a modest rent might be obtained from a local stables for grazing. The club can decide for itself instead of being a helpless onlooker. The asset will never be found to be wasting.

If however, there is enough land for an extra 9 holes then any lingering reluctance should disappear. Action should be swift, firm and decisive to avoid the monotonous chant down the next fifty years "*In 1985, the Committee could have bought it for £X,000*"; and its antiphon: "*Is that all?*".

The faint-hearted may first wish to take outside advice as to the use of the land for golf, its soil, its drainage, whether contours are suitable. These questions can be answered if necessary after an option has been obtained. An option is a wise precaution even though the vendor's agents are looking to the golf club as their prime purchaser. If the land is not suitable for golf, it

is likely to be an odd piece of country not commanding any inflated price but naturally the club will not reveal any potential development which they envisage. Any change of use will involve planning consent and that is where the option to buy will be useful while an application is being considered. Its outcome may indeed modify assessment of the purchase price. If a local land agent or surveyor is also a member of the club, so much the better; but in any event, the input of an expert in valuation should come at an early stage.

If attractive drawings start to arrive on the committee table, they should be allowed to lie there. Low handicap golfers with less artistic prowess but more influence in the club may also feel obliged to offer layouts.

The risks of adopting schemes prepared by persons not specifically qualified are awesome when the current costs of construction are added to those of purchase. Mistakes at this stage are not only expensive: they also lead to discomfort and frustration later when they have to be corrected.

The dangers of an amateur design are compounded by two other factors. If the preferred scheme is presented by a person familiar with the process of grants, interest-free loans and sponsorships, he acquires some extra 'pull' which may tip the scales his way. The other factor operates if the captain is a low handicap golfer and feels obliged to present his own version of a new 9 holes. If he is also likely to be instrumental in raising a substantial sum towards the cost then that club could well be in for 10 years of turmoil. To be fair, a scheme prepared by someone who has never planned a golf course before may be a winner. But the odds are all against it. Nevertheless there is a curious tradition in golf clubs with rules as democratic as could be desired, that the Captain acquires some despotic authority above the governing processes and has to be indulged in 'his year'. The layout adopted will be there long after the Captain's name has faded on the Honours Board. Let us hope it will be a memorial to him by permanence and because of his reticence.

Outside advice raises certain difficulties in itself. It is natural for the Committee to wish to sell a scheme to the members which is obviously attractive and progressive. They will often want more from their consultant than he can deliver. Any plan is a compromise and an extension has not only to make the usual compromises with the land but also with the connec-

tion to the existing course, the provision of a second starting point, the avoidance of too much disturbance to the holes in play, and the provision finally of two reasonably balanced, blended halves. If the existing course is tightly planned and the new acreage is minimal, nobody can provide the sort of length, which is often over-optimistically expected. Total length is a precise function of acreage and contour and a layout which exceeds the appropriate yardage will either be unsafe or eccentric.

The golf course architect will have estimated probable costs and made recommendations as to the method of construction. The work will be beyond the means of an average ground staff but there will be jobs they could undertake. There may be one or two greens to be made within the confines of the existing layout. One per year is a fair allowance though there is scope for more if earth movement, for example, is done by the contractor chosen for the extension. There is a British Association of Golf Course Contractors. Try them first.

The golf course architect or his agronomist should also have determined whether existing grass cover on the new land should be retained. The groundstaff can undertake mowing economically. They will do it more regularly and at better times than a contractor who has to come from a distance. It is surprising how quickly a fine turf will develop where the surface is acceptable. The savings are considerable. Ploughing, cultivating and sowing cost something like £1,200 to £1,400 per hectare and there is still further stone-picking and a long maintenance period before a playable surface develops.

New greens to a full specification by contract cost £8,000 to £9,000 each and tees, say £2,000 per hole initially. Fairway bunkers can wait but allow for tree planting in the initial stages. On these lines, with the ground staff's collaboration, the cost of the 9 holes could be held down closer to £110,000 than the normal range, about £150,000, entirely contracted out.

We seem to have run a long way past the Sleazeville-on-Sea Golf Club's current activities. They have not yet bought the land but they already have a plan for the new 9 holes pinned to the notice board. There is plenty of green colour with yellow bunkers and a bright blue water hazard. But there is no scale. Therefore I cannot honestly assess whether it might be a disaster or not, though I have my suspicions. But I did notice that it was signed by a member and that he was the Captain and that he had a low handicap and that he was promoting fund-raising activities. That is an irresistible combination. Nobody will dare to stand in his way. My educated guess therefore is that S.O.S.G.C. are in for a long haul before they get it right. I could be wrong. I hope so. Otherwise, does anybody want to buy a holiday cottage called 'Dungolphin'?