

Deep in debt in the desert

GOLF in the Arizona desert is perhaps the ultimate in money gone mad. Land, clearly good for nothing, is converted at vast expense into golf courses so different from that which we know and understand that, in some instances, clubs have had to change the rules of the game. While in Phoenix for the GCSAA annual conference and trade show, I had the opportunity to visit two courses and play one of them, writes Michael Coffey

Both clubs, Desert Highlands and Troon, are surrounded by, and exist for, real estate development. Some of the statistics give a graphic account of how such clubs come into being - property at Desert Highlands, a development enclosed by a fence and with armed security guards on the gate, starts at half a million dollars and the price for a standard design home goes up to 1.8m dollars.

There are 27 greenstaff for 18 holes and the estate common areas, green fees are in the region of \$100 and you can only be introduced by a member. Members include US PGA Tour stars such as Dale Douglas, Tom Weiskopf and even the designer Jack Nicklaus, who recently competed in a members and guests day with his son. To be a member, you have to buy a plot, although you don't necessarily have to build - they start at \$350,000.

At Troon, the story is similar. you have to buy a plot then apply for membership, which costs an initial \$25,000 entrance fee, playing dues of \$175 per month and \$600 per annum for food and drink. The course, designed by Tom Weiskopf and Jay Morrish, recognises Weiskopf's win in the 1973 Open Championship and his winning mementos are in a trophy case in the spectacular clubhouse, which features English carpets, cherry wood from France and Italian marble.

The locker room has a gym, sauna, steam bath and plunge pool. So far, in the first year of operation, there are 62 members, but real estate sales were going well during my visit. The course, with its winter dormant Bermuda grass, is not nearly so inviting to play as Desert Highlands, although the two-tone effect certainly makes each hole stand out. Needless to say, there is a replica of the famous Postage Stamp short hole (Royal Troon's 8th) which somehow looks out of place with a backdrop of the Sonoran desert.

I played Desert Highlands thanks to Denver superintendent Dan Pierson, together with a friend of his and Howard Swan of Golf Landscapes. We all commented on Nicklaus's architecture, cost of construction, cacti, wildlife and the general opulence. STRI director Dr Peter Hayes was a passenger in our buggy.

Nicklaus designed this as his first desert course and it opened in 1983 with the first televised 'skins' game. The cultivated part of the course is probably only about 70 acres and is laid out among the real estate plots in such a fashion that every hole is separate. The practice ground is huge and, like the rest of the course, heavily contoured. There is also an amazing putting course, which features five par threes, an overall length of 1,087 feet and a par of 41!

Crushed marble

The golf course, as we played it from the back tees, is 7,099 yards, par 72. This month's front cover, taken from the 1st tee, illustrates the difficulties. The light brown, long 'bunker' down the left side is a feature found on most holes. It is finely crushed marble and forms a sort of semi-rough - you play the ball where it lies and it is known as the 'transitional area'.

A local rule, covering a ball hit beyond this area into the desert proper, reads: 'A ball hit beyond the transitional area into the desert may be played as a lost ball with the following option: drop ball in fairway at point where ball last crossed margin of fairway with penalty of one stroke.'

Going into the desert in golf clothing is not advised as the cacti literally come out and grab you, hence the warning that: 'this golf course can damage your health, (and pocket)! On one occasion when, having hit a shot straight right, I ventured into the brush,

picking my way very carefully, I found nine golf balls before I came across mine. I was evidently out of my depth as a golfer, as well as financially!

No one bothers to pick up the golf balls and when they strike large cacti near a tee, for example, they plug (again, no one bothers to prize them out). During the summer, when temperatures can rise to 120 degrees, the cacti cover up these holes to conserve moisture. The temperature inside the plant rises so high that the imbedded golf balls just melt.

Played from the back tees, the course was too tough for our party, not all the holes were well-designed and the examination of the golfer was not always fair or obvious. Much use has been made of little pimples and a succession of grass potholes, all of which penalise you heavily. None the less, the course was fun to play, although whether I could cope with being a playing member, I very much doubt.

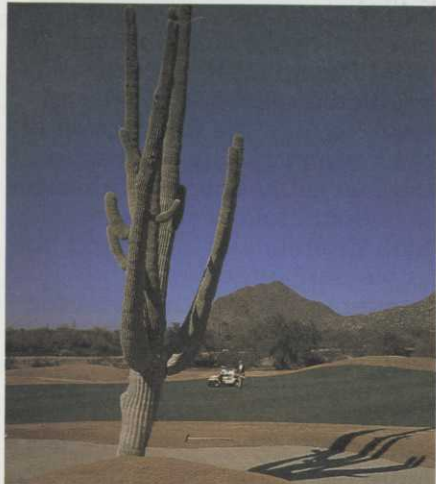
Irrigation is obviously a major factor in maintaining such a course and the club is particularly proud of the fact that it only uses recycled waste water. I do not know the quantities, but they must be considerable as the local planning authorities have decreed that, in two years time, golf courses will only be able to use waste water and that it will have to be self-generating. In other words, to irrigate a golf course in the desert, you will need to have properties or an hotel producing enough for your needs. Water from the Phoenix area has to travel 900 miles with an average evaporation rate of some 40 per cent.

The uniformity of playing surfaces was excellent if totally 'artificial'. Greens were lightning quick and had many sweeps and considerable borrows. Landing areas, in the main, were quite wide, but there was a great premium on the correct line from the tee, making approach shots much easier.

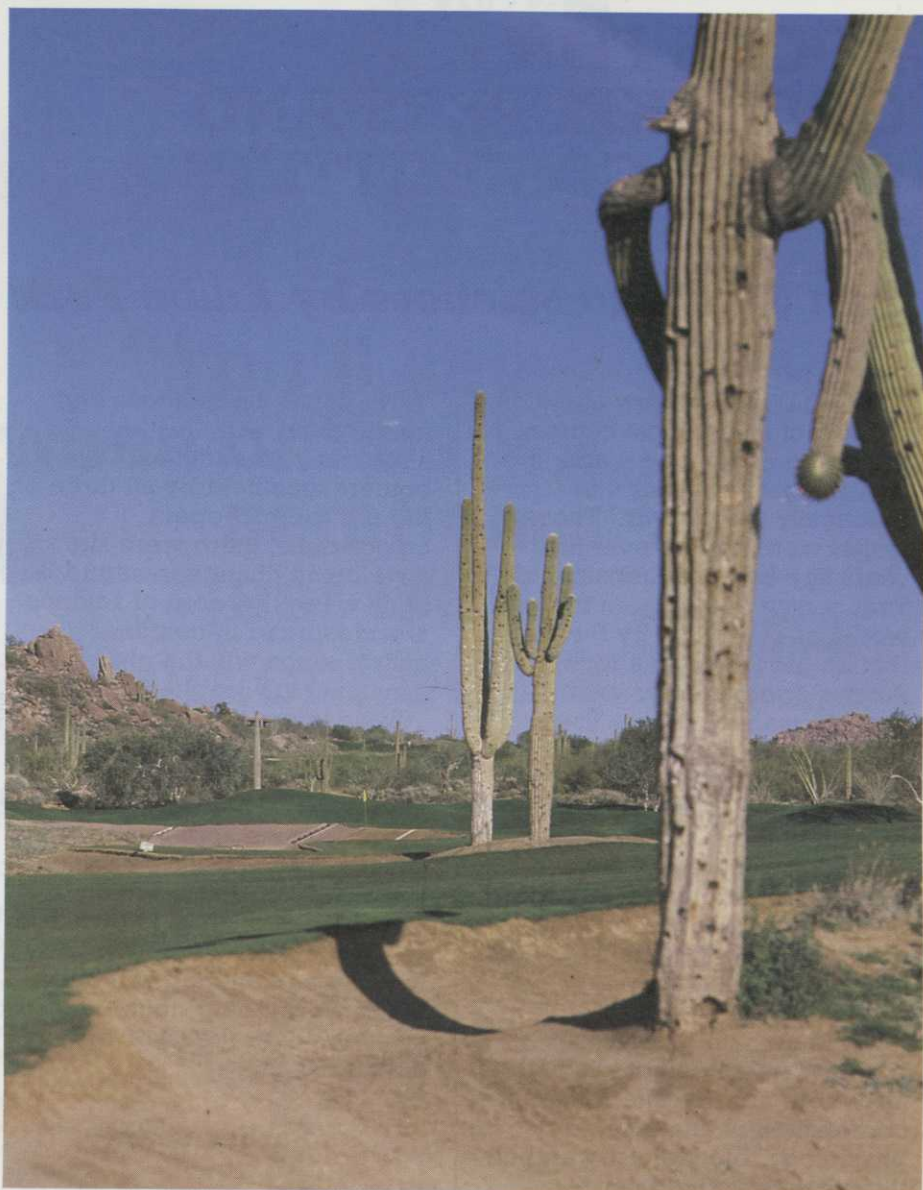
With such a comprehensive irrigation system for fairway watering, each sprinkler head had the yardage to the middle of the green on it - a great help and, no doubt, a trend that will become commonplace over here in time.



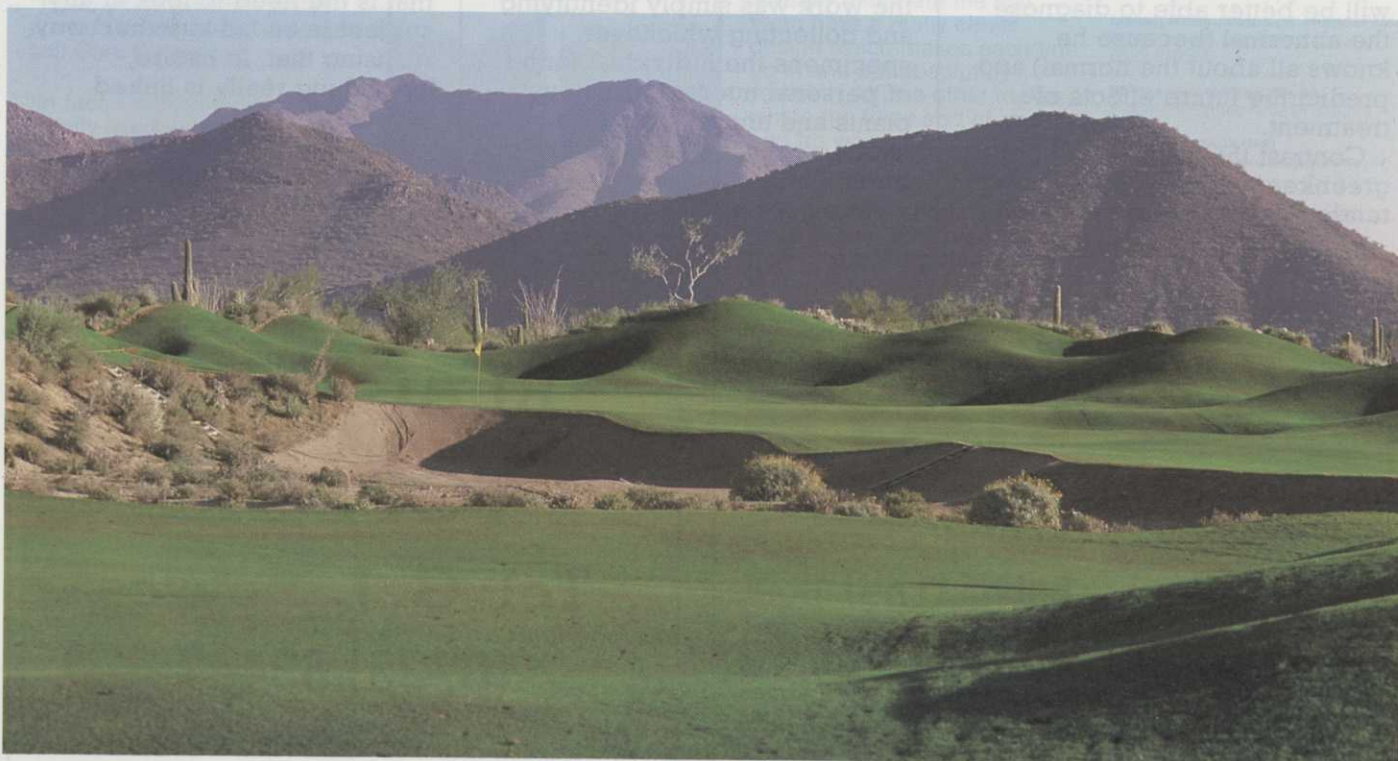
Howard Swan ventures off the beaten track.



Troon's 'two-tone' course.



Golf balls imbedded in cacti.



Desert Highlands 9th green.