

## THE WAY FORWARD

THERE are two things to be said about the Royal and Ancient golf club's survey "The Demand for Golf" which points up the need for 700 new golf courses in Britain.

1. There is not the slightest chance, other things being equal, of opening new courses at the rate of one every 5.2 days until the end of the century.

2. Even if such a rate of construction could be met it would still not satisfy the demand for golf.

The survey is based on a natural demand of 18 holes of golf for every 25,000 of population. But other expert studies, and practical experience in places such as Edinburgh where supply just about balances demand, suggest that the natural demand for golf is of the order of 18 holes for every 15,000 of population.

Even then the statistics can be misleading. Take the area around Virginia Water and Ascot which is positively saturated with golf clubs at Sunningdale (2), Wentworth (3), Berkshire (2) and Windsor. On a strict head count of population you would conclude that this area was over-supplied with golf. Yet for the golf-mad son of a window cleaner living in, say, Egham, there is no access at all to golf.

Clearly we must bear in mind the wise words of Mark Twain, appropriated to his own use by Disraeli: "There are lies, damned lies and statistics".

The most important factor in planning a new golf project is to establish the need for it. In this context it is unfortunate that most of the current golf construction is for the top of the market. Private clubs such as the East Sussex National and Wentworth's new south course do make important contributions to the game but they contribute very little if anything to solving the vital problem of making provision for everyone who wants to play golf. The same goes for resort development, the main source of new courses.

The irony of the current golf starvation is that the main constraint on course construction, the forbidding price of land, has eased considerably. Land is available and farmers are desperate to find alternative uses for their idle acres, land for which we tax-payers are paying subsidies to the farmers to take out of crop production.

There is also, as we know, a chronic shortage of houses in Britain and a no less pressing need to provide the employment to build them.

The third factor in this frustrating equation is that private finance is available to build houses in conjunction with a golf course which, in the curious economics of the housing market, does not cost anything.

If market forces were allowed to operate freely those three circumstances outlined above would very quickly supply the demand for golf in the hard pressed middle sector of the game, the run-of-the-mill golf club. But market forces are frustrated by planning restrictions. And quite right, too, you may say. We cannot have unrestricted housing development all over the nation's heritage of natural beauty.

My problem with that attitude is that planning is all too often applied as a



Peter Dobereiner . . . "the need for high quality courses is imperative."

synonym of prohibition. Well planned development does not despoil the countryside; it enhances it. The city of Cambridge is the outstanding example, among many, of how good development can compliment the natural surroundings.

For the end of the market which embraces the newcomers to the game, the casuals who do not want or cannot join established clubs, the frustrated masses most in need of access to golf, the local authorities should be doing much more. In most cases they have the land. They have an obligation to preserve green belts and, with golf courses, a perfect way of doing so. And at the same time they have an opportunity to exploit a sure fire way of generating income to relieve the burden on municipal finances. If any city councillor wants a vision of golf as a licence to print money I suggest he visits Beckenham Place Park in south London any time of day, any day of the week.

English municipal authorities in general are strangely reluctant, unlike their enlightened Scottish counterparts, to go in for golf. And it is in this area that I think the R and A's proposed National Golf Development Council could play a most important role as a catalyst, particularly in providing information on the economic potential of municipal golf projects.

The other vital function I envision of the NGDC is as an informed pressure group to gain the necessary concessions for golf in the planning process. Presumably it will also act as an advisory service for landowners contemplating going in for golf development, although most golf course architects routinely make site visits and give a free general assessment of the possibilities.

But by far the most important in solving the problem of providing for all who want to play the game, at a price they can afford, is the profit motive. I believe that the most fruitful approach will be partner-

ships agreements, between entrepreneurs and farmers, landowners and public authorities to build simple, basic fee-paying courses. By this I do not mean cheap and nasty courses, which has so often been the case with the despised 'muni'. A good golf course is the product of good design and the result does not have to be expensive. If a course is built from sound principles, allowing the land to tell the architect how the holes should flow, which is how Donald Ross and Alister Mackenzie worked, then good golf can be provided at a reasonable cost. And if the essential groundwork, such as drainage and soundly based greens, is done well in the beginning then courses can be upgraded over the years on a five or ten year plan, adding trees, shrubs, hazards and the embellishments which increase the character of the course.

So strongly do I believe in this concept of basic, high quality courses that I propose to devote the rest of my life to designing and building them.

PETER DOBEREINER

VETERAN golf correspondent, Peter Dobereiner, has retired from The Observer in order to pursue a new career as a golf course designer and consultant. He intends to restrict his writing commitments to books and magazines and to specialise in creating low budget golf courses. Dobereiner's experience in farming and golf has convinced him that economic construction and maintenance charges need not mean a sacrifice in the quality of golfing values. His first course opens next year and he has a number of projects in the planning stage.