

**Golf & The Fight for
Discretionary Dollars –
Part III – The Changing Course of
Golf Course Design**

by Gregory E. Martin

For those of us who depend upon the golf industry for our living, the recent growth in golf course development is encouraging. The continued expansion of the industry is positive, but we must be careful. This exposure has forced growth, indeed, but it has also encouraged scrutiny. While golf is enjoying its greatest popularity in decades, many parts of the industry are seeing greater clientele expectations and therefore, higher operational costs.

These raised expectations have generated higher maintenance and construction costs, more stringent environmental impact considerations and more difficult or "visual" golf courses. Unfortunately, this has tended to shift consumer access to the more fortunate. While, rising expectations of the average golfer continues to fuel golf course development it has also forced existing golf facilities to make improvements in an effort to keep up with current maintenance and design trends.

Ultimately, the facility that meets the quality, service and challenge demands of this golfer will ultimately win the "discretionary dollar". And while industry expectations change, so must golf course architecture. There is a growing acceptance or expectation of unique layouts with less intrusive design features, less earth moving and fewer elaborations. Pete Dye, the most diabolical architect of our generation has amended his design style to provide more "playability", while enforcing shotmaking.

The most revealing aspect of golf course design trend is toward "Traditionalism" or "Minimalist". These are current, and often overused, design themes that have crept in to the vocabulary of golf enthusiasts. Recently developed courses like Sand Hills in Nebraska and The Links - Red Mike in South Dakota punctuate a trend toward minimalist design. In fact, our acceptance of more traditional courses like Shinnecock Hills illustrates this.

At Sand Hill, Golf Course Architects Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw moved less than 10,000 cubic yards (cy.) of earth to produce a remarkable inland links style layout. This is extraordinary by today's standards, because new golf course construction can generate 150,000 cubic yards on earth (on the low side) to more than one million (1,000,000) cubic yards of earth, some even more. I have yet to play Sand Hills, but by all accounts, this is an impressive project.

However, finding land that has all the required ingredients to truly be considered minimalist is a difficult task. At Sand Hill, the architects sought and found the greens and worked back through the fairway toward the tees. While this seems romantic, even idealistic, it is certainly the exception. Most practicing golf course architects could, in fact, find a pure minimalist golf course on a 1,500 acre site given little or no development constraints. In fact, it is widely agreed that there is a tendency toward Minimalist, however, golf course architects are finding that clients and developers expect this style of architecture due to reduced budgets, site and environmental constraints, or less attractive feasibility studies.



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While golf course architects agree that there is a movement toward simpler design themes, this can be traced to our client's requirement for greater economic viability from the start of a project. Therefore, private and high budget projects are less prevalent. Golf course architecture is moving away from the elaborate design themes of the late 70's and 80's in an effort to develop facilities that are economically and environmentally sustainable.

So What's Next

Golf continues to expand in different markets today. Juniors, seniors, women and minorities are all being exposed to golf in greater numbers. Michael Jordan is developing a number of quality practice facilities throughout the suburbs catering to low and middle incomes and juniors. A current project of ours calls for the inclusion, if budget allows, of a 'junior' course within the confines of the practice range. There is an increasing need for upscale par 3 courses, public and private practice facilities, short 'precision' ranges and executive courses.

A number of quality nine hole venues, designed by the area's finest architects are currently planned or are open for play. The 'nine hole course' is no longer perceived as the country cousin of the 18 hole private club. Through innovative course design and flexible facility programming, golf will continue to grow into various markets.

But all is not easy. The National Golf Foundation reports that the total number of rounds played in the U.S. has moderated considerably since 1989. Additionally, The National Golf Foundation has amended their prediction of 30 million golfers by the year 2000 down to 25 million. Nationally, new course openings are moderating. Does this indicate that the golf boom is finally out of gas?

Maybe. This is more likely a correction in golf market development. Recent trends indicate that the profile of the average golfer is changing. No longer does the avid golfer need to join a Country Club to feed their addiction. The average golfer with \$20-\$40 in his pocket every week is just as likely to be a frequent golfer as the local country club member. Further, these golfers may be just as, or more loyal to their facility than the private club member.

Golf Course Architects and Management companies see this and are developing facilities that meet this market niche. New public facilities are being developed at a pace that outnumbers new private courses by almost 2:1 and these courses are designed by the best Golf Course Architects available. Better yet, these facilities are maintained and managed with the same scrutiny as private facilities. Production of higher quality public and daily fee facilities is finally catching up with the public and daily fee demand.

Further, Municipalities, Park Districts and other public bodies are realizing that golf facilities provide a revenue stream and can subsidize a variety of non-revenue producing programs. Golf courses provide open space, recreation and revenue for public bodies within a specified market niche. A variety of golf development projects are being introduced in many urban or landlocked suburban locations to provide this valuable asset.

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Conversely, private clubs will have some difficulty in the coming years recruiting or retaining members. With the growing presence of high quality public facilities, potential club members find it hard to justify the up front and continued expense of membership when suitable daily fee facilities exist. These facilities will need to market themselves with all aspects of the club, with added swimming, health and fitness facilities; varied food and beverage marketing and more targeted business networking. Further, these clubs may need to open the door to outside revenue producers like golf outings, weddings, banquets or other income producers in an effort to sustain the changing market conditions. Those clubs that are foresighted and creative in a demanding marketplace will be able to keep their private status.

This challenge is within public and daily fee golf also. High end golf development growth is moderating, while established facilities, with no record of improvement, are pumping thousands, or even millions of dollars to implement or redo irrigation systems, renovate greens, tees, fairways, install extensive landscaping and expand clubhouses. Fortunately, or unfortunately, traditional stereotypes of golf are melting while the industry expands. Whether or not this is positive for the game, expectations are changing. The average golfer now has access to a variety of upscale and affordable courses from the architects that brought you PGA West, Muirfield Village, Haig Pointe, Wild Dunes and Kemper Lakes. Unquestionably, established facilities must be ready to meet this quality expectation challenge.

MAGCS, GCSAA, and Golf "Birdies and Bogeys"

Birdie: To Roger Stewart, CGCS, for the outstanding efforts of he and his staff in presenting Stonebridge to the PGA Senior Tour and the rest of the world. Lookin' Real Good Rog!!

Birdie: To Ken Lapp, CGCS, and his dedicated staff for the outstanding presentation and conditioning of Dubsdread for the Western Open. Next - the U.S.G.A. U.S. Open?????? Nice job Ken!!

Birdie: To CDGA President Ray Zanarini and his proactive stance toward the cause, concerns, and activities of today's Golf Course Superintendent.

Birdie: To the MAGCS Arrangements Committee for an outstanding family and fun offering at the August 5 MAGCS outing at the Kane County Cougars game. You miss it - YOU LOSE!! Fun is paramount; Baseball incidental ...

Birdie: In a buggy season ... to "Merit".

Bogey: To apple scab, honey locust bug, Japanese beetles, aetinius you know whats, heat, hot heat, hotter heat, and well ... you get the picture. This summer in general ...

Bogey: To the stimpmeter, Double bogey to the stimpmeter!!!



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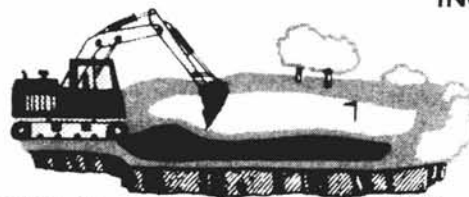
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