A golf course for less than $1 million
Hurdzan says site selection crucial for economy courses, and he has proved it

BY KATHY BISSELL
At the November 1988 Golf Summit, created and chaired by the National Golf Foundation, golf's private research arm, the topic was how to assure that golf — the sport and the industry — would be as healthy in the future as it is today. One of the biggest challenges facing all golfers is the demand for courses.

The National Golf Foundation (NGF) has estimated that if both the demand and the number of courses being created stay the same, the United States will have a shortage of 4,478 courses in just 12 years. If tee times are tough to get now, just wait. It'll get worse.

One reason for the shortfall is the cost of creating a new golf course. It's a cost that can easily climb into the millions.

Today's most heralded courses, like the TPC (R) Stadium Golf (R) Course at PGA West — or any course by a top name designer — are expensive propositions. Joe Walser Jr., senior vice president of Landmark Land Co. Inc., in LaQuinta, Calif., says of the construction cost at The Stadium Golf Course, "I gave (architect) Pete Dye an estimated and chaired by the National Golf Foundation. Pete Dye an estimated and chaired by the National Golf Foundation.

Michael Hurdzan's stance that a golf course can still be built for around $1 million will get worse.

To most, $1 million sounds like a lot. After all, Jack Nicklaus has won just over $5 million in his career.

But when it comes to building a golf course, it's bare bones. Consider, again, the PGA West Stadium Golf Course. Earthmoving costs were about $1 a cubic yard. Two million cubic yards of earth were moved to create The Stadium Course. That's just earth moving; never mind irrigation, planting, cart paths and the rest. The scope of the problem becomes more clear.

However, Hurdzan doesn't just theorize about his price. He has done it. In places like The Vineyards near Cincinnati, Ohio, which Golf Digest names as one of the best new places to play. At Crystal Highland Golf Course, near St. Louis. And at Willowhead, near Hyannis, Mass.

But there are rules to follow to create a golf course of your own on a limited budget. And as Hurdzan cautions, expectations must be balanced with reality.

Here are his guidelines:

The cost of land is not included in the $1 million.

An 18-hole golf course needs a minimum of 150-160 acres. Unlike agricultural needs, it doesn't have to be 100 percent tillable acreage. Ravines, streams, rolling landscapes that would be completely unusable for farming may make an ideal setting for a golf hole. Dye often has said that the first thing he does when he sees a piece of property is "to walk it and discover the four or five or six naturally occurring holes in the land." Then he molds the others around what Nature provided. (However, there are some who believe that Pete and Nature have never been on speaking terms.)

The land must have good drainage.

Hurdzan says, "Given a choice between a site that costs $1,500 an acre and needs $1,000 an acre in drainage improvements, or well-drained land that costs $2,000 an acre, the choice should be obvious." He also points out that costs apply to non-arid locations, meaning that much of the western United States and popular locations such as Southern California and Arizona will not meet the criteria. Similarly, sites in South Florida, or other places to water available.

Today's golf course construction planning is not a simple matter. After land acquisition and right-of-way questions have been tackled, there remains environmental impact statements, utility questions, historical concerns, and the like. Creating a golf course takes as much land planning expertise as building a business park or a residential community.

According to Hurdzan, "The more complicated planning or construction problems a site presents, the greater expenditure required to make the site suitable." The shape of the land is important. According to Hurdzan, a square or rectangular shape is ideal — almost essential — if you have 100 acres and it costs $10,000 an acre to drain it, you have $600,000 in drainage costs. If you have 100 acres and it costs only $50,000 an acre to drain it, you have only $1,000,000 in drainage costs. And the land needs to have good topsoil, few obstacles — environmental and legal — and irrigation water available.

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There is big money in earth-moving cost,” Hurdzan points out. He gave a low of $2/cubic yard and a high of $3/cubic yard. “I’m talking 100,000 cubic yards, whereas other people might move a million.”

Don’t expect a lower planning fee for a lower budget course.

“We don’t charge less for a low-budget course. Sometimes it takes more time — a lot more — in planning and problem-solving and time in the field than for a more expensive course. We work within the budget.”

Use $8 a round for each million spent in construction as a rule of thumb.

“If a golf course is well designed and built, you should be able to get 40,000 rounds per year out of it. At $15 per round for fees, plus whatever you get for carts and the shop, you can probably gross a million dollars a year.”

— Michael Hurdzan

Kidwell’s partner in golf course design.

“Three years ago, Jack was nearing the age of 70 and sold the interest to me,” Hurdzan explains.

Most Kidwell-Hurdzan business has been from city, county, state and governmental agencies, though in recent years they have seen an upswing in the private investors who want a golf course built.

“About 60 percent of our work now comes from governmental agencies and 40 percent from country clubs and daily fee type courses. Of the 40 percent, probably 10-15 percent is daily fee and 10-15 percent is country club, with the rest housing or resort.” They have 35 courses in some stage of construction at present.

“We have the strongest demand right now from daily fee, privately owned and publicly owned courses. But when the economy turns around, the private investors are gone. The government built golf courses even during the Depression. They have a recreational imperative to meet. And golf courses make money.”

Hurdzan’s courses stretch from Kansas to Massachusetts and from Toronto to Georgia. Most of his business falls east of the Mississippi.

“Just because we have built courses for low budgets doesn’t mean it’s the only kind of work we do. If you give us $4 million, we’ll build a world class golf course. Right now, we might not be famous, but we help people make money. We’ve been in business a long time. We try to be competitive, but we think our work compares with anybody’s.”

Kathy Bissell is vice president and director of public relations for Landmark Land Co., Inc.

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