Keeping up with the Joneses

"Why remodel your course? You should try to make a golf course the best it can be. Why paint your house every five years when you have been doing this for so many years? Nobody’s hitting golf balls at your house. Nobody’s taking divots out of your furniture. Nobody’s driving golf carts across it. And old men sitting in wheelchairs now are not Hoe-ing it, either. And... your anatomy has been the same since the 1900s, yet golf balls are flying 300 yards in the air today.

"Your house needs work, why doesn’t your golf course, too?"

- Brian Silva, golf course architect

BY MARK LESLIE

A golf course remodeling boom is sweeping the United States just as new course construction figures are soaring. Across the country, public, private and even resort courses are getting facelifts. It can be minor mending, like leveling tees or redraining bunkers. Or it can be major surgery, like rebuilding all 18 greens, adding tees and instaling a state-of-the-art irrigation system.

Whatever the extent, remodeling work is rising in all segments of the industry, and the money the builders and old tradition, and these guys aren’t going to let it (going out of business) happen to their clubs. There’s too much to lose. So remodeling is the only alternative.”

...and that completed the complete remodeling, the club had a “standoff” between older members, who didn’t want the Donald Ross, and the younger members, who are well traveled and have seen changes in design trends that have meant better quality, maintenance and irrigation. Walker said that if improvements weren’t made, San Jose CC might have faced the same fate as another area course about 10 years ago, whose members deserted it. “Our course is in a new dimension,” he said.

Hundreds of country clubs are aging. Their greens are old and were designed decades ago to withstand much less traffic than they are experiencing now. And, according to the San Jose Country Club in Jacksonville, Fla., where he last year finished a complete remodeling, the club had a “standoff” between older members, who didn’t want the Donald Ross, and the younger members, who are well traveled and have seen changes in design trends that have meant better quality, maintenance and irrigation.

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The goal

The aim for course members and officials in remodeling is better playability, maintainability and aesthetics. “Golf courses either get better or they get worse,” said LaJoy, who is remodeling several courses. “If you are not continuously improving a golf course—using new technology such as greens construction—even it’s going to get worse.”

According to Walker, green is the priority item for his clients—“then the tees, then bunkers and contouring and drainage of fairways and a lot of cart path work.”

LaJoy agrees, saying most of his clients are rebuilding every green.

Yet Brian Silva, of the architectural firm Cornish & Silva in Whittinsville and Amherst, Mass., said that it is not true at courses where he has worked.

“I don’t have many courses that redo all their greens,” Silva said. “The bulk of cost is being spent on bunkers and tee renovation and reconstruction, and a few greens.”

He added: “Forward tees are a big part of renovation work. We pay a lot of attention to multiple tees. Normally we put in four sets of tees.”

“I’m seeing 50-year-old golf courses where the average markers for the men are 6,200 yards and the average markers for the women are 5,300 yards.”

At many courses, the tinkering starts the moment it opens—and it never ends.

Edward H. Connor III, a Ponza Inlet, Fla., architect who has studied designs of many famous courses of masters like Donald Ross and A.W. Tillinghast, said: “The plain fact is that no course is ever complete. Eachalteration, particularly if done by the original designer, brings the picture a little closer to perfect focus.”

Ross, for instance, toyed with Pinehurst #2 from the time it opened for play in 1907 until his death in 1948.

Andy Banfield, a senior designer with Tom Fazio Golf Course Designers in Hendersonville, N.C., said that Fazio has fine-tuned Canada’s member one-ranked course, National Golf Club in Woodbridge, Ontario, almost since it opened in 1976.

“We’ve been doing a little here and there the last five or six years. Various things, from cart path adjustments to greens contours,” Banfield said.

When The National changed from a local membership golfers’ club to a corporate-type facility with many new golfers and a lot of play, it meant some greens were too small.

“‘They had not been designed with enough size and pin placements to handle the high traffic,” Banfield said.

Banfield said that even the best ranked course is pushed by competition. “The National is feeling that, too, because of the (nearby) Devil’s Pulpit course,” he said.

LaJoy said Augusta National may be the best example of continual course improvement. LaJoy worked for several years with George Cobb, a consultant with Augusta National for about 20 years.

“Even though from year to year you go there and don’t notice any changes, every year we’d get a five-page list of changes to the course. It may be just redraining bunkers, redraining drainage in fairways, recutting and redesigning bunkers, or replacing or rebuilding tees... You’re continually doing it just to keep it getting better.”

“Your entire purpose may not be to change the course but to see that its quality continues to improve. If you’re not improving it, it’s getting worse.”

Banfield said that in many cases, one planned change leads to others.

While improving the irrigation system, the owner and designer may decide to change a green that doesn’t drain well. “Then you regrade that, and it’s all a bunker,” he said.

Cart paths are another major item.

“Courses built 10 years ago probably didn’t have a walk-to-wall cart system,” Banfield said.

“Probably 60 percent of them do now. With more and more play being with carts, it’s almost imperative that you have a cart path system.”

Indeed, Southern Concrete Pavers President Pat Bresnanan’s reports his Lecanto, Fla., company is tearing out the asphalt cart paths at one Doral Country Club course and installing new concrete paths. The price tag: $750,000.

“It’s amazing how many courses want to improve their paths,” Bresnanan said.

Meanwhile, some courses, like Cheval, decide a total remake is necessary.

“We totally renovated the 18 holes,” said Snyers. “There’s not a speck of dirt we didn’t touch.”

“It cost $2.5 million. We installed a new irrigation system, concreted all the fairways, filled in some lakes, dug some ditches... built 18 new greens to USGA specs.”

And Walker, after showing San Jose CC

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members the greens and drainage problems, did "a total, total redo — tear-up and replace and clear and grub and irrigate and drain and excavate lakes and lagoons."

Time and acceptance
Walker's comprehensive remake of San Jose took 10 months to complete. While it was being done, members were playing the Greens course and played there.


"A lot of clubs have a big question on timing," Walker said. "Anybody undergoing a renovation program struggles with the idea: Do you do three holes now and three next year, or do you close down nine and do nine this year and nine next year?"

"Ideally, the best way to do it is to bite the bullet, shut it down, get in there one time and knock it out. It took us 10 months at San Jose: it was a really big project. But for some clubs they could make quite a bit of improvements in a short amount of time, depending on if they are in the North or South. In the South we could do the work in six to eight months. In the North it may make sense to do nine holes at a time."

Snow
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have used it to justify major capital expenditures or the need for more labor. But it's most important function may be dousing fires.

"We're fire fighters," said Snow. "One club may be having a problem that we've already seen at 20 or 30 other clubs. This year's winter damage is a good example. It was extensive throughout the northern part of the country. But people at one club may not realize other courses are having the same problem. It is a relief to the membership, and particularly the superintendent, to know that."

Snow rarely visits a course now, something he misses. Still he enjoys his new responsibilities, which include editing the Green Section Record.

"I'm going to be requesting a technical editor/writer to help with that," said Snow.

Mike Kenna, the recently named director of Green Section research, has helped remove some of the burden in that area.

"Maybe I came at this job from a naive standpoint. I didn't realize how much administrative detail there would be. If it were just a matter of overseeing the Green Section Record, chairing the Turfgrass Research Committee and overseeing the staff that would be OK. But with all these other things..."

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