Building Pulpit no frivolous venture for Hurdzan Group

BY MARK LESLIE

There's nothing trivial about Chris Haney's latest pursuit, a majestic 315-acre golf course 35 miles northwest of Toronto. 

The co-developer of the popular board game "Trivial Pursuit" has teamed with architect Michael Hurdzan of Columbus, Ohio, to create a course that elevates him from "plain vanilla" golf course designs to the "take-a-look-and-breathe-away" variety. 

"You kind of gasp when you get to the first tee," said Andy Banfield, a senior designer for architect Tom Fazio, in reciting his visit to the Haney-Hurdzan creation, Devil's Pulpit. 

Set on a "spectacular" piece of land and built with Haney's "well, we had a budget in mind when we started" attitude, Devil's Pulpit will open July 1. After you're done playing it has already formed — with 400 memberships bought and paid for at prices ranging from the early $17,000 figure to $55,000. 

"I know golf courses around the world, and I'm hard-pressed to think of a better one," said a proud Haney, whose main partner in the venture is Trivial Pursuit co-inventor Scott Abbott. 

And the course was not even complete when he spoke. The $2-million first hole was nearing the end of its 17-month construction cycle; and No. 13, a "weak sister" in Haney's words, was being built by three scrapers and four bulldozers in May. 

Hurdzan: "I think Devil's Pulpit probably has 14 unforgettable holes. They have such strong personalities that you just cannot forget them; and the other four holes pale by comparison simply because they are up against such strong competitors. 

"You could take those four holes and put them on another course and they'd be superstars. That's the kind of golf course it is." 

Fry said, "It's not as difficult as people might think by looking at it. It's a psychological golf course in that it looks hard, but it has very large landing areas." 

Haneys goal was to build the best golf course in Canada, supplanting No. 1-ranked National Golf Club in Woodbridge, Ontario, designed by George and Tom Fazio. 

Now the goal is to have the best sister courses, with a second — Devil's Links — under construction on a nearby mountain top. 

"Whatever it takes" became the tag line of the project. That became obvious when Haney declared the course would fill the entire 315 acres — twice the usual land for a championship 18-hole design. 

"We weren't fettered by budget or by the constraint to build houses," Hurdzan said. "I mean, here's a 315-acre piece of ground with zero houses on it. Chris said, 'I don't want houses. I want the best golf course in Canada.'... 

"Those guys have tasted success with 'Trivial Pursuit'... and they recognize that in order to have something successful you have to go that extra bit. They are willing to do that, and if it means digging dirt down into their pockets, by God they'll do it."

"Digging down" started on the first hole, called the Tower Hole because tees off aiming at the CN Tower in Toronto 35 miles away. 

"Perhaps the biggest in the world, the first hole covers 25 to 30 acres and is 'an engineering marvel.'" 

"Basically the land was on a 45-degree slope and we sort of filled the slope to 180 degrees," Haney joked. 

A 10- to 12-foot-high, 400-yard-long quartered stone wall was built along the entire first fairway, separating the fairway from a lake. A seven-head-wide system irrigates the 160-yard-wide double fairway. 

There is no down side to the figures: 

- $25 million for the project, including $8 million for the land, $6 million for the clubhouse, and $2 million on environmental concerns. 
- 1.7 million cubic yards of dirt moved. 
- 100 acres of sod including 80 acres of bluegrass in all the play- able roughs, and 20 acres of bentgrass on greens, tees and fairways. 
- 120 tees covering more than four acres. 
- Four acres of greens, which average 8,000 to 8,500 square feet, compared to the normal 5,000 square feet. 
- 128 sand traps and 80 grass traps. 
- Seven miles of cart paths, which Hurdzan "went to extremes to hide." 

A second, 250-yard-long stone wall that runs one to three feet above water on a pond between the 15th and 16th greens. 

- Fifty-six pieces of earth-moving equipment kept busy at one time. 

- Rainbird Maxi 4 Irrigation System, with 1,200 sprinkler heads. 

"It's impossible to hit another fairway — even if you tried," Haney said. "You cannot see one hole to the next. It's like the magical mystery tour." 

Hurdzan has been known as the master of $1-million golf courses. The Pulpit has changed that. 

"When you work with a low budget, you build something that's functional. But it doesn't show how good you really are," he said. "You're doing plain vanilla. When you have a Devil's Pulpit, where you have a client who says, 'Show me how good you are,' that's a step up. We've had a lot of good projects. But this is the first time..."

Continued on page 12

Take your pick: Bells & whirlwinds or Scotland reborn

BY MARK LESLIE

When they're completed, Devil's Pulpit and Devil's Links make the most diverse sister golf courses in the world. And that suits co-developer Chris Haney just fine. 

"These are night and day," said Haney said of his two championship 18-hole layouts in the hills northwest of Toronto. 

"You can't compare them. It's like comparing PGA West to Muirfield."

— Chris Haney

By playing the hole to the left, you can then play to the green on the right, thus creating an extra, "betting hole." 

Haney said 400 golfers from North America, Australia, Great Britain, Japan and the West Indies have signed up as members. He is aiming for a total of 750 for the two courses. 

"My research shows my membership is the lightest for 36 holes anywhere," he said. "Most have 900 to 1,500 members."

Said one observer: "The courses are a blast. I can't wait for the game to come out."