Years of frustration come to an end for Southern California Golf Ass'n

BY PETER BLAIS

If anyone knows the frustrations a golf association can encounter in developing its own golf course, it's Newell Pinch.

Pinch joined the Southern California Golf Association as executive director in 1965. He advanced from director of golf at the California Golf Association to SCGA as executive director in 1981. He sweated through the three-year dance with the Irvine Co. Their joint attempt to build a golf association course in Laguna Beach ended in 1984 when they failed to overcome protests from environmentalists concerned about preserving the area's woodlands.

He got burned during the five-year tangle-up over Boy Scouts of America-owned Firestone Ranch in Brea. The SCGA and scouts had agreed to a 99-year lease for an 18-hole course in 1981 when the idea first presented. But environmentalists again spiked the deal, this time bemoaning the loss of oak trees and making access to the property costly so the project simply became too expensive.

"We had $750,000 in hard cash tied up in those two projects," Pinch said.

When Firestone Ranch withdrew from the 1982-83 negotiations to build the course, Pinch decided to turn its attention to acquiring the property and building a golf course. The board looked at a dozen sites before settling on Rancho California in Murrieta. The Robert Trent Jones Jr. design first opened in 1970. It was a quality layout that had fallen into some disrepair because of the financial difficulties of the previous two owners.

"It was a fixer-upper," Pinch said, "but the quality was still there. We negotiated for enough land to eventually build another nine holes. And someday we will construct a new clubhouse to replace the tiny one that's there now. That's not a big priority, though."

The SCGA was scheduled to close the Rancho California deal in late January. The long-sought acquisition will fulfill the group's two major goals — providing a site for association tournaments and an additional source of income.

"Golf associations operate 99 percent of their courses on dues. Most associations raise dues to fund a course. But that isn't always easy to do. Building a golf course is a tremendous risk. The SCGA has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in Laguna Beach and Brea, but has nothing to show for it. Member courses will likely be upset about competition from the nearby association facility. Don't be surprised to lose a few of those members. Chances are they will return once they see the benefits. Golf associations are non-profit organizations. Golf courses make money. That combination will create problems if the association hopes to keep its non-profit status. So expect to spend a lot of time with lawyers. Working with developers who want to donate land can be difficult. Developers usually want to keep the best land for house lots and give away what's left for the course. Poor land can make for a costly course. Time can work against a golf facility ever being built. For example, when the idea is first presented, 70 percent of the board may be for it. Five years later, when the research is done and a decision is needed, the board members have changed and only 40 percent may want to go ahead with the plan. Expect differences of opinion regarding the type of course to build. Some egos will be wound to a PGA-caliber facility in appearance and difficulty. But remember who will play the course. Golf association members. Amateurs."

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