BRUSSELS, Belgium — With permits and financing firmly in hand, developers of Domain Des Princes Golf Course began building their Jack Nicklaus-designed layout here in late 1989. A local environmental group went to court and succeeded in having the permit revoked. Five years later, the course is no closer to reality than it was in the late 1980s.

This is the type of situation the newly formed European Golf Association Ecology Unit hopes to stop from happening again.

**Hurdzan pursues yellowed pages & hickory sticks**

By **MARK LESLIE**

It is like “Christmas and an Easter egg hunt all rolled up in one.” It captivates, excites and enlightens. And it has made Dr. Michael Hurdzan a frequenter of flea markets and dusky old book stores.

It is the hobby (and treasure hunt) of golf collecting. “I just can’t describe to you the excitement of finding something you’ve been searching for for years,” said Hurdzan, a golf course architect whose massive collection includes books, club, ceramics, glassware, buttons, games, you name it. “I can almost tell you the time, date and place I found each one of them, and what I paid for them. It’s like an Easter egg hunt and Christmas all in one. And every single day is like that. Collecting is the most exciting thing, if you really treasure the things — which I do.”

Hurdzan, then young and far from wealthy, caught the collecting bug unawares on Christmas Day 1967. “Someone gave me Book of the Links by Sutton. I had no idea those kinds of books even existed — let alone on golf course architecture. I was absolutely captivated by the idea. I read it and reread it. It was a wonderful experience. It became so exciting to me that I started to collect more and more things. I went to book stores and flea markets — and still do.”

Hurdzan pulled out an old cigarette dispenser for rolled cigarettes. “Just last week-end I discovered this. It’s probably from the ‘20s or ‘30s, but it’s a wonderful piece.”

Hurdzan’s “primary love is books,” and, indeed, like beloved family, every one in his cache has a story.

• There’s Scotland’s Gift, written in 1885 by Charles Blair Macdonald, and Golf in America; which Hurdzan bought in a book store in 1969 for $5 and $5, respectively.

**Von Hagge lays claim to the unbearable lightness of course design**

An agricultural engineering degree-holder who played on the PGA Tour a few years and as a club professional before joining Dick Wilson’s architectural firm in 1967, Robert von Hagge has established his own design practice around the world. Eighty percent of his work is abroad. “It doesn’t seem to be letting up,” he said. Managing editor Mark Leslie caught the 63-year-old von Hagge at his Spring, Texas, headquarters.

**Golf Course News:** It seems you have your own idea of golf course design. What do you do that says: “This is a von Hagge design”?

**Robert von Hagge:** Visually, our courses speak profoundly to folks because I think we’re the only ones who really work with light. We’ve studied light for years. The way the light works from morning to evening across this plane of vertical expression you’ve created, and how it works from season to season allows a very romantic mystique to come forward at all hours of the day.

When you see photographs of great golf holes, or courses, they are always taken at that dramatic time of day when the angle of light is most profound. We’ve proven significantly that we can bring those dramatic hours into the middle of the day, so that hour after hour you’re playing a different-appearing golf hole. It eliminates the repetition and boredom that you find in so many courses.

In earth movement, the only thing you can rely on ad infinitum is the light. It’s the only thing permanent. Trees and grasses die and horizons change with cityscapes.
Q&A: von Hagge

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and developments and everything else. But you can rely on light as a dependable partner in your efforts.

GCN: How, in particular, have you eliminated the boredom you refer to?

RvH: About the last 12 years we’ve come up with 11 basic vertical shapes. Their lighting allows you to create a kaleidoscope of visual experience all day long. Simultaneously, it allows you to explain the shot presentation. The problem for the golfer to solve is much more easily portrayed with the way we use light. We’re not just relying on humps, bumps and trees to do that.

I get a kick out of people talking about great golf holes, like the 18th at Pebble Beach. Put that in the middle of Oklahoma and I defy you to say it’s a great golf hole. It’s setting. It’s the horizon vistas. It’s the mood, that special feeling when you stand on the tee. And the sport of golf — you have a foursome, one guy’s hitting the golf ball and there are standing around taking it all in. It’s got to be total theater, 360 degrees. You can’t build it like a stage prop looking forward. Nobody plays golf that way, and certainly the other three folks aren’t looking straight ahead.

GCN: When did you start looking into lighting?

RvH: About 1980. Until then, we used the traditional approach — only with our own kind of expression. More and more, I began to see the overpowering importance of visual presentation. You can have a tactically wonderful golf course, but you don’t usually present it with pizzazz and excitement and change it up so nothing repeats itself, it’s a dead end.

Conversely, there are a lot of strategically poor golf courses that are magnificently looked at and all of a sudden are in a golf magazine’s top 100. And they wouldn’t pass a good tactical test as far as design is concerned. There are a number of great, great clubs that aren’t in any rating and that nobody will ever see. They are so private they don’t want you around.

GCN: Most golf courses are most dramatic looking at sunrise or sunset. That’s when you see the movement of the light the most.

RvH: Those are the most dramatic hours. After about 11 o’clock, most golf courses are dead meat until 3:30 or 4 o’clock. We take great pride in keeping that kaleidoscope of visual experience through shadow and texture and light changing right through those dead hours. I don’t think anybody else is doing it. If so, I think it happens by accident. I think a lot of our architects today are like natural piano players or dancers: They can do it, but they don’t know how or why. Or else they’re guarding their secrets. That doesn’t take away from their talent. We have enormously talented people out there now.

It’s also the kinds of grasses you use as texture that either diffuses, absorbs or mutates light.

GCN: The old-time designers didn’t have the equipment we have today...

RvH: But they didn’t need them. They were physically picking green sites and maybe massaging 500 to 1,000 cubic yards of material. Now you’re moving 7,000 or 8,000 for the same green site.

My father worked for Donald Ross and I’ve built four or five clubs in Florida for him and some around Chicago. If they would move 70,000 cubic yards of material with mules and slips and what have you, that was enormous. And he’s got some classic golf courses. They moved 81,000 cubic yards of material on Pinehurst No. 2, and what would you change about it? I mean, it’s there.

In today’s world it’s different. You can’t do anything decent in Florida that doesn’t require moving at least 300,000 cubic yards of material — forgetting the fact that you might have to work with negative drainage. You’re creating everything. First, if that golf course is any part of Florida and not in the boondocks, you have to create what we call the primary horizons — that first mask of green that blends into the long horizon that also simultaneously eliminates all that garbage would visually interfere with that interaction if you didn’t put it there. We’ve done that a lot in the desert courses of California where the sun picks up glass of the desert that reflects during the day. But if you do that green mounding and sloping and blending it into the long mountain background, you’re in a visually contained environment.

On every project like that you have to create a sense of arrival that envelopes you when you go through the gate. My wife could have done something at Augusta or Pebble Beach that would have been acceptable and she doesn’t even play the game. But more and more, to justify the club as a business investment, the market location takes precedent over everything else. And oftentimes that’s a deserted garbage dump, or some piece of terrible wetland that everybody has ignored but it’s where people can get to it.

I get a little ornery when people speak of the great work Mackenzie and Ross did. They had the pick of a candy story! They were sent out on a mission by wealthy groups to find the best site for the new clubs, I’m not saying they didn’t do a good job. But the present-day architect seldom gets a shot at something like that anymore, and usually in dramatic settings, but you can’t get to them unless you parachute in.

GCN: And they didn’t have to do that 30, 40 years ago?

RvH: Not at all. Yet they were truly “country” clubs — considerably out of the urban area.

GCN: What have modern equipment and technology offered to the evolution or advancement of golf course design?

RvH: It’s become more sophisticated and versatile. You can do a lot of wonderfully sophisticated machines on clubs that were impossible 20 years ago. That’s not only the equipment, it’s also the growing talent of the guys on the machines. We have some shape-makers in America who are absolutely incredible. That’s been an enormous improvement.

That works directly with my feelings on the CAD system. You cannot do those sorts of things on a computer. We started it and we still use computerized construction specifications and some heavy earth-moving drawings. But all the fine shaping and tailoring is done in the communication between the architect and shaper on site — because here again you’re working with light and at various times of the day. Sometimes, if you need to create a bit of mystique or sophistication, it’s working with three and four inches of dirt that rises and falls and still positively drains water across it. Plus, just three or four inches of dirt can either void out or bring into focus something magnificent on the horizon. That can’t be put on a CADD system.

The long views are so important. The first thing we do on a site is inventory the horizons to make sure our primary backgrounds are always on dramatic shots. Eliminate the background at Pebble Beach and how much mystery or drama do you have? Or, we play away from smokestacks and other ugly things on the horizon, or eliminate it by moving dirt.

GCN: How large is your company’s staff?

RvH: Sixteen people. Lead designers are myself and three architects who are partners in the company. All have been with me since they got out of school: Kelly Blake Moran, whose been with me for 11 years; Rick Barr, 13 years; and Mike Smelek, 13 years.

Myself and one of the three architects are common to every project. We make 60 to 75 visits per project. You have to spend time out there. The more you look, the more there is to see. It’s usually the developer’s lifetime shot and if you don’t

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GOLF COURSE NEWS

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Q&A: von Hagge

Who is now in the Orient. Lamar Bunn in for awhile. Now they're all on their own.

Design graduates who have gone out on their own. Spend every buck well, you're delinquent.

RvH: Yes. We had three with Nicklaus for awhile. Now they're all on their own. Rick Robbins started with us. Mitch Walker, who is now in the Orient. Lamar Bunn in for awhile. Now they're all on their own.

Design graduates who have gone out on their own. Spend every buck well, you're delinquent.

RvH: Yes. We have the tree huggers and the grass shooters. Gus Puppines crossing the border in groves. And it should happen, or you'll have the rape of the most gorgeous property in the world. Everybody and their brother is trying to build a golf course down there now. And for every good one there are 20 real bad ones.

G CN: What is the toughest country to work in?

RvH: Sometimes it is the easiest, too. Japan. From a permit standpoint, it's really tough. We're dealing with a course in the Osaka area and there is permit after permit and permit. It's political football as it is in every country. It's a rich man's sport, so the guy who wants to get elected to office will make it difficult for you to get a club together. And still, when it comes to contractors, once you get the project mobilized and on stream, they are the best. They are wonderful.

G CN: You were perhaps the first architect to join with a touring pro [Bruce Devlin] and that dissolved. Would you do it again?

RvH: I was the first to undo it, too. No, never. It's nothing personal, because Bruce is a good guy. I brought him into my company in 1970 at his request. He wanted to learn about the business. Bruce's forte, like most of these players, was in the marketing aspect more than anything else. Bruce was playing a lot of golf and doing a lot of TV. His contribution was more in marketing. But we found for the kind of offers you get that you've got to have an equal division of time and attention if you're going to divide the revenues that way.

I do think for fledgling companies, it's probably a good thing. Like Rick Robbins:

It goes Gary Koch some cushion. He's announcing and trying to develop future sources of revenue. And it's good for Rick, who doesn't have a big identification yet.

G CN: How do you view the evolution of course design?

RvH: For so many years, most golf courses had the tee, the green, the fairway and a row of trees going down either side, with a couple of bunkers now and then. That was architecture until, I think, when Dick Wilson and Robert Trent Jones began to turn it around in the early '60s. By the early '80s it was in full cry, and then it passed them. US young pups took it up from there and developed it into a sophisticated presentation. I think very honestly I'm the only who's done anything since then at another level of artistry [light and movement] should work that way and how you can control it.

Long after finishing touches applied, von Hagge stays in touch with clients

By Mark Leslie

SPRING, Texas — Von Hagge Design Associates has developed a marketing program for its clients that extends six years after course opening and which Robert von Hagge calls "an award-winner."

"Instead of selling a roll of blueprints and showing up now and then, we stay involved," von Hagge said. "It's been a real boon to the guy who's invested his life savings in the project and doesn't know where to go."

With the program, he said, "We've been able to close over 70 percent of the potential members and real-estate buyers in our projects."

The marketing program starts with forming the board of directors, deciding the type of club (equity, non-equity), and forming the charter group. Von Hagge conducts three walking tours with prospective members, speaking on his design philosophy, "so they can become part of that creative effort." By involving members, he said, "you begin developing the history and heritage of the club, the pride which turns into value which turns into profit."

"The country club is a social statement. The architectural statement is the golf course. But you want them to know you're setting out to create a premiere, world-class facility that maybe doesn't exist in their area. We share every bit of it [with prospects] every step of the way."

Von Hagge also hosts two events for the media — one, a preview tournament before the members even get to play the course. Von Hagge Design Associates trains the superintendent in similar circumstances before he takes the course over. The firm heads up the club's green committee for three years after the course opens.

"We have an arrangement with all of our clients that we can do this internship with them," von Hagge said. Involvement also extends to the landscaping.

"We look at the embellishment of the course because we don't believe you should landscape a course before it opens — rather just prior to or at opening," von Hagge said. "You can't design and construct a house and hang the drapes or pictures with any sense before that happens. It has to be up before you can really feel the mood of what is needed in what area. It's stupid to try." He added: "We've been polishing this strategy because we feel we have to in order to stay in the strata we're in."

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