Distance devices attract business, speed up play
3,000 courses could have units by year 2000

By Peter Blais

If the brochures are to be believed, they do everything except take Stimpmeter readings.

Electronic distance-measuring device screens are springing up on golf carts at courses throughout the country. Depending on the unit, they can provide the golfer an accurate distance to the pin, a look at the bunkers and other hazards along the way, advice from the pro on how to play each hole, warnings about approaching storms, two-way communication with the clubhouse, leader boards for tournaments, a food and beverage menu and other features.

The units attract business and supposedly speed play by anywhere from 15 to 20 minutes per round. "Golf courses are in business to satisfy golfers," said Douglas Dudley, president of Yardmark. "These devices are the latest and greatest amenities to be offered. And they speed play, which puts more money on the bottom line."

While just a handful of courses currently have them, suppliers predict they will be on 2,000 to 3,000 courses nationwide by the end of the decade. The units can generally be leased for $1 to $2 per round or purchased for as much as $150,000 to $200,000. Here's a sampling of some of the more active suppliers in the marketplace:

- Yardmark of Lajolla, Calif., was one of the first in the business back in 1988. Back then it depended on electronic

Off-color ad puts California course in black

By Peter Blais

TURLOCK, Calif. — Turlock has more churches per capita than just about any city in the country, according to George Kelley, co-owner and co-designer of the recently opened Savannah Course at Stevinson Ranch Golf Club.

Therefore, he wasn't surprised when his billboard picturing the No. 4 Eiden hole and asking "Do you have enough balls?" stirred some debate in the local community.

"I was getting a call just about every day from someone in the clergy," Kelley said. "It was kind of amusing. I knew the double entendre might be a littlecontrover..."

Ocean Course sale settled, at last

By Peter Blais

CHARLESTON, S.C. — After years of wrangling, the sale of the Ocean Course at Kiawah Island has finally closed.

Bankruptcy Court Judge Falcon Hawkins approved the sale of the Pete Dye-designed layout to Virginia Investment Trust (VIT) on Sept. 27. The Resolution Trust Corp. (RTC) has operated the facility since Landmark Land Co. declared bankruptcy and the federal government seized the property back in October 1991.

The RTC took over 22 Landmark properties and managed to sell off all but the Ocean Course. The sale of the seaside layout, made famous as site of the 1991 Ryder Cup, was delayed by environmental challenges and failed negotiations.

VIT — which operates the Osprey Point, Turtle Point and Marsh Point courses at Kiawah — was the lone successful bidder for the property at a RTC auction last spring.

VIT offered $27,000,100 for the Ocean Course. The closing has been delayed the past several months because of a dispute over ownership of nine of the Ocean Course's 214 acres.

It was discovered that Kiawah Resort Associates (KRA), a major real-estate developer on the island, owned the disputed acreage.

In late September, the RTC and KRA reached an agreement on the nine acres, which included parts of several holes on the north section of the golf course, according to Resolution Trust Corporation spokesman Michael Fulwider.

"We are very pleased that the deal has closed and RTC was able to get a substantial return for taxpayers," Fulwider said. VIT spokesman Beverly Armstrong said the company plans some maintenance work to the course, although he didn't specify what work would be done.

"We're delighted to have the Ocean Course under our ownership because it places all the public courses at Kiawah under one management," he said.

CourseCo finds niche managing government-related courses

By Peter Blais

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — When CourseCo Inc. took over management of the nine-hole golf course at the former Mather Air Force Base earlier this year, it became the first private firm in the West to manage the privatization of a military golf course, according to President Tom Isaak.

Working with the County Parks and Recreation Department and a local citizens group, CourseCo is helping develop a master plan for the course and 1,400-acre regional park located on former Defense Department land.

It's the type of government entity-related project in which CourseCo has proven very effective, explained Isaak.
CourseCo active in Far West

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former high-level California bureaucrat. CourseCo was formed in 1990 as an offshoot of EBTigolf Inc., which was formed two years earlier to lease and manage municipally owned Riverside Golf Course in Fresno. CourseCo is developing a master plan for the city for the accelerated reconstruction of Riverside. In 1990, the National Golf Foundation awarded the course its Public Golf Achievement Award in two categories — promotion of public golf and golf course maintenance.

CourseCo also manages the golf operations at Deep Cliff Golf Course in Cupertino and Mallard Lake Golf Course in Yuba City. CourseCo employs approximately 100 people at its four courses. The company has also provided specialized agronomic services at facilities it doesn’t manage, such as Bodega Harbor Golf Links, Bakersfield Country Club, Sherwood Country Club in Thousand Oaks and Petaluma Golf and Country Club.

“We have a regional concentration in Northern California and the Northwest,” Isaak said. “We’re actively looking at Oregon and Washington.”

“Maintaining quality as you grow is the challenge. We think our niche is somewhere between a Mom-and-Pop operation with its obvious limitations and the larger management companies with their long lines of distribution. Our growth will be constrained by our emphasis on maintaining quality.”

“We’re not looking at buying 15 or 20 courses and then trying to take ourselves public. We’re looking at places where we can make a difference by improving a project.”

That was the case at Riverside. CourseCo committed to spending at least $300,000 annually on course maintenance when it took over the operation in 1988. The course was in dire need of upgrading and CourseCo exceeded that amount by an average of $60,000 annually over the next three years, Isaak said. CourseCo rebuilt many bunkers, added a 1/2-acre bentgrass nursery, installed an 8,000-square-foot practice green and completely rebuilt three other greens.

“Greens fees had been real cheap at Riverside and golfers were concerned about fee increases when we took over,” the CourseCo executive said.

“But they saw how much we were investing in the course and began to support us.”

That support allowed CourseCo to raise green fees 60 percent between 1989 and 1992 without any golfer opposition and with the unanimous support of the Fresno City Council.

Altogether, CourseCo has managed $2.5 million in improvements to its facilities since 1992, including a complete clubhouse reconstruction, parking lot addition and tee reconstruction at Deep Cliff; a driving range and rebuilt miniature golf course at Mallard Lake; and a proposed state-of-the-art irrigation system at Mather. Isaak was general manager from 1977 to 1980 of the Bodega Harbour Homeowners Association, where he completed and opened the golf course. While that experience opened his eyes to the golf industry, he spent most of the next decade in government and politics.

Among the posts Isaak held while in the employ of the state of California was director of the Office of Majority Consultants and Chief Administrative Officer. Isaak’s partners include fellow Stanford University graduates Mark Fredkin, a San Jose lawyer, and John Telischak, a real estate developer residing in Marin County as well as Director of Golf Course Maintenance and Construction Gary Rogers and Director of Club Operations Steven Schwartz.