Practitioners cite success with ceramics

By MARK LESLIE

Arnold Palmer, who wants nothing but the best for his home course, has taken the plunge with porous ceramics. Old buddy Gary Player has, too. And arguably the most agronomically knowledgeable golf course architect, Dr. Michael Hurdzan, has been an engineer on the putting-green-sans-pea train for years.

Now, even as the debate over organics-versus-ceramics rages on, greens mixes boils in the golf industry, more superintendents, architects, and builders are venturing into the world of custom-designed root zones.

"I think there is no question porous ceramics have physical characteristics that can be used to amend a sand to..." Continued on page 19.

Par-3 development gains popularity, viability

By PETER BLAIS

New golfers need a place to learn the game. Developers can't find reasonably priced land for larger facilities. The solution: Build more par-3 golf courses. That's just what's happening as the shorter layouts increase in number.

...15 facilities throughout the country and 50 acres depending on the layout... Continued on page 34.

Private clubs suffer under new tax code

By PETER BLAIS

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — More than a quarter of the nation's private golf clubs experienced a drop in membership sales and one-third reported a decline in gross food and beverage revenues one year after the federal government eliminated the income-tax deductibility for club dues and reduced deductions for business entertainment, according to a National Club Association study.

"In a lot of cases, a par-3 makes sense," said Barry Frank, vice president of NGF Consulting. "You don't need much land, somewhere between 15 and 50 acres depending on the layout..." Continued on page 36.

Public-access boom pushing existing courses to upgrade

By J.BARRY MOTHES

ORLANDO — Upgrade. Upgrade. Upgrade. Get used to that word. It just might be the golf industry mantra for the rest of the decade, and into the next century. Consider the following items from less than a week's worth of national news clippings:

• A $2.3 million upgrade is ongoing at the Salishan Golf Links, a 38-year-old resort course in Gleneden Beach, Ore. Holes have been remodeled, a new irrigation and drainage system is being installed, and an 18-hole putting course is planned.

• The 27-hole, daily-fee Galloping Hill Golf Course in Union, N.J., opened in 1928, has embarked on a $4.8 million upgrade that includes a new automated sprinkler system, fairway reconstruction, new tees and greens, and new cart paths.

• The Golf Course Com... Continued on page 38.
Tony Jacklin is the winner of 14 PGA European Tour events (including the 1969 British Open) and four-time European Ryder Cup captain, and Open) and 11 other international events (including the 1970 U.S. Open). Tony is also a golf course appraiser in Harrisburg, Pa. Hirsh will be one of three speakers addressing upgrading/upscaling here at Golf Course Expo, Nov. 9-10. Joining Hirsh will be course architect Rees Jones and Dave Johnson, chief agronomist with Dallas-based GolfdCorp, operator of 41 daily-fee courses nationwide.

Hirsh, who has completed more than 100 course assignments in the last five years, insists every course has its own specific upgrading issues. "I've gotten the use of the same spreadsheet for two cases," he said. Jones put it succinctly. "Private courses might restore because members love the course. The daily-fee courses are the ones that have to do it to compete. I'm not sure upgrading is really the word. Sometimes it's restoring. Regardless, you're going to see it more often." Hirsh said one common bottom-line principle in upgrading is an old standby: contribution. "We try to apply that to any upgrade," he said. The question is, 'Is it going to contribute as much to the property value as the cost incurred?' That gives you an idea whether the upgrade is feasible. There may be cases where it isn't, but you still feel you need to compete with other courses. You must get a sense of your marketplace." Added Jones: "With daily-fees, an owner must be careful not to incur debt service that forces him to raise fees above the competition. In Orlando or Scottsdale, where you have a different client every day, it doesn't matter. But in non-resort areas, an architect must be very careful."

Courses can improve greens without overwhelming costs and extended labor that interrupt play, Johnson explained. "Besides," he said, "if you don't have good greens you're not going to have any customers."

Salishan's upgrade is an effort to keep up with the times and competition. "Golfers are more sophisticated nowadays," said Hank Hickox, president of Salishan Lodge Inc. "This is our 30th anniversary, and it is time for change. We have tried to reflect the opinions of our customers in our improvements." Salishan has always done well in course rankings, in part because of excellent promotional work. But there was a feeling the course could improve. Architect Bill Robinson of Florida has introduced mounding on holes that lacked definition and focal points. Certain fees have been changed for playability. New drainage will hopefully make year-round play a reality. A new course measuring 340 yards has 18 holes with undulations and curves.

While many course operators automatically convert upgrades into higher greens fees, Salishan won't raise prices. Green fees will remain between $30-$40. That exemplifies a distinction between upgrading and upscaling. Upgrading is making improvements to the course and facilities. Upscaling is an upgrade specific to daily-fees and greens fees. The two are closely related, and sometimes interrelated. But virtually any course can — and in many cases, should — consider upgrading. Upgrading, on the other hand, is a riskier, more aggressive venture having more to do with testing the limits of what golfers are willing to pay and meeting the conditions they expect.

The proposed upgrade at Allentown Municipal, of which $350,000 is pegged for a new irrigation system, is considered critical to its future and competitiveness. Designer Daniel J. Schlegel of Ault, Clark and Associates said one proposal is to change the course from a three- to a five-tee system, which would attract all levels of golfers.

When most course operators think "upgrade," the focus is usually on the course. But Hirsh said there are other things to consider. "Something we fail to look at in this business is that it's a business, not just a piece of real estate," Hirsh said. "It is a business that's very management intensive. You could not do a thing to the physical facility, but upgrade your people and you still have done an upgrade. You see the result of bad management in the shape of the facilities.

Not just older courses benefit from upgrades, said Jones, whose recent efforts include The Equinox in Vermont and Duke University Golf Course in Durham, N.C. "I think the nice aspect of today's designs is we're building lower-profile courses without the bells and whistles that golf magazines told us we should in the 80s," he said. "It's easier and less expensive to restore these courses... You can accomplish the task by rebuilding the greens to USGA specs, restoring or redoing bunkers that have been removed. In the 50s, when my dad originally designed a course, they didn't have enough money for any fairway bunkers." Industry experts and specialists like Hirsh, Johnson and Jones agree come back to the putting greens and fairways and tees, the true essence of any golf course.

"Fifteen or 20 years ago the only thing you could do was rebuild your greens," said Johnson. "Now, with developments like deep aerification and Verti-drain, you can pretty much modify the soil profile and end up with the original greens in better shape."