

Casino Beach vies for 1st Tee support

By MICHAEL LEVANS

FORT WORTH, Texas — Steve Champion is getting ready to squeeze an 18-hole grass-surface putting course, a nine-hole pitch-and-putt and a nine-hole executive layout on 54 acres. And if there's any room left, he'd like to build a six-hole whiffle-ball golf course.

Imagine this ambitious project with routing by Michael Hurdzan, a solid junior-golf program and an aggressive business plan, and you just might have a perfectly accessible — and sustainable — golf facility.

That's Champion's plan for Casino Beach Golf Inc. He needs

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First Tee puts Belle Isle back in play

By MATTHEW PHILLIPS

DETROIT — For minorities, the game of golf has historically been an island difficult to reach, so it is fitting that Detroit's Belle Isle Golf Course, Detroit's first public golf course, has been selected as one of the

initial sites to receive funding from The First Tee (see related story).

Sponsored here in concert by the PGA Tour and the Tiger Woods Foundation, and underwritten in part by Ford Motor Co.'s Land Services Corp., the First Tee program

at Belle Isle Golf Club will encompass renovations to the 1,881-yard, nine-hole course as well as provide youth teaching facilities and a related instructional program. Ford has committed dollars to help with the course renovations, but the lion's share of the program's funding is still to be sought.

Rick Smith, teaching pro turned golf course designer, and his company Rick Smith Golf Course Design, will carry out the various Belle Isle course renovations, which will include the addition of a nine-hole pitch-and-putt course, a practice green and a chipping area.

In addition, Smith will develop the curriculum for the youth program which will encompass several facets of golf, including practical instruction, etiquette and actual play.

Belle Isle Park Superintendent Marchel McGehee, who oversees the 980-acre Belle Isle recreational island, sees The First Tee program as "a wonderful opportunity to put minorities and underprivileged youth in touch with a game that has for many years eluded them."

Since announcement of the program in November, McGehee has received several inquiries from interested parties including one from a local school for the deaf. He is anxious to see the momentum continue and looks forward to a program tee off of June 1, 1998.

"We hope to see about 200-300 kids participate the first year," said McGehee.

Refurbishment of the driving range and development of the instructional program will take top priority in order to kick off the program in a timely manner. Next fall, work is planned to begin on the training center, practice green and the nine-hole pitch-and-putt course, "where kids can take what they have learned and apply it first hand," said McGehee.

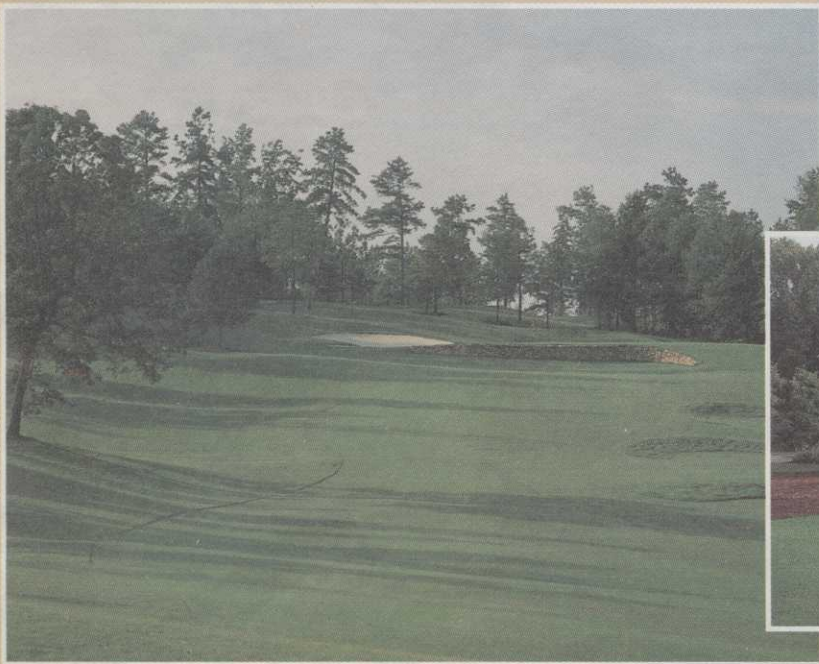
McGehee hopes to have all course renovations complete by 2000.

On McGehee's renovation wish list would be getting the course's lights back in operation for the first time in more than 20 years.

According to McGehee, this would lengthen the playing window for the kids as well as allow the recreation department to generate more course revenue for the program.

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First Tee gains massive backing

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to provide, through the help of participating organizations and individuals, expertise and consulting advice, land-planning services, course design and other assistance that will help reduce the cost of the project.

Fifteen developments have been identified as meeting The First Tee criteria thus far, including renovation of Detroit's Belle Isle course made possible by a \$2 million donation by Ford Motor Co. and Visteon Automotive Systems.

The First Tee plans to have 100 courses in the program in the next two years.

To this point, financial commitments for these developments have been made by the PGA Tour (\$30 million), The United States Golf Association (USGA) (\$3 million over the next two years) and Augusta National Golf Club (\$5 million). Other organizations that plan to make financial commitments include PGA of America and the Ladies Professional Golf Association. Individual contributions are being accepted as well.

"You have USGA and PGA Tour, the two biggest names in golf cooperating," said Michael Hurdzan, of Columbus, Ohio-based Hurdzan Fry Golf Course Design Inc. "They're saying you have to do something to get people into this game. And I believe they're putting their money

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where their mouth is and investing in the future of the game."

Service and expertise commitments have been made by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA), American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA), National Golf Foundation, American Junior Golf Association, Tiger Woods Foundation and National Minority Golf Foundation.

"The neatest thing about The First Tee is that all of us are in it together," said Judy Bell, president of the USGA. The USGA has provided The First Tee with a grant of \$1 million for 1998 and plans an additional \$2 million over the next two years, pending a USGA review of the program.

"We see this as a supplement to our current grant making," said Bell. "The goal is to start with the local champion who is getting the job done but needs some help."

The initiative appears to be gaining momentum, and supporters, by the day. On December 9, the ASGCA inked its formal commitment to The First Tee, offering "... our services in any way we



A typical First Tee layout could look like this map of a facility in Duval County, Florida. It is one of the first projects to receive The First Tee funding. The nine-hole layout measures 2,974 yards and plays to a par 25, with four par-3s, three par-4s and two par-5s.

can," according to Alice Dye, ASGCA president.

First Tee participants will be able to obtain ASGCA design assistance during the development of any one of the designated course models—which could be a 3-hole course, pitch-and-putt course, nine-hole course or 18-hole course.

Course architects Hurdzan and Denis Griffiths believe accessible facilities can also be profitable and sustainable. They both see The First Tee as a project that has been too long in coming.

"For years I've said that golf has to build this base," said Hurdzan. "I got my start in this business building very inexpensive golf courses. Those courses became profitable, but more importantly, they allowed people to come in and play at a very low fee."

Hurdzan currently has three low-cost courses on the boards, one with Fort Worth, Texas-based Steve Champion,

owner of Casino Beach Golf Inc.

"I've been on the soapbox for many years," said Griffiths, principal of Braselton, Ga.-based Denis Griffiths & Associates Inc. and most immediate past president of the ASGCA.

"Finally we're seeing the golf community saying there are many different methods to making golf accessible and also profitable for those who are running the facilities."

While the ASGCA has made its commitment, formal word from the GCSAA is next to come.

"Our involvement hasn't been determined specifically," said Jeff Bollig, senior manager of media/public relations for GCSAA. "It will probably be a chapter-based program where The First Tee courses exist. We may provide funds to maintain them or provide a member to work on the courses. We may even provide a publication to assist the managers of the courses."

Casino Beach: 'We can make it work'

Continued from previous page

to convince The First Tee that he has the wherewithal to make the project happen.

"I want to do something for family golf," said Champion, "but I am a businessman. I'm going into this project and I expect to make a living doing it. I believe it's possible to do a good thing and make a profit."

It's this sort of project—accessible yet profitable—that Hurdzan, principal at Columbus, Ohio-based Hurdzan Fry Golf Course Design, believes will take golf into the future.

"The end result should be a course that can be built at a low cost and maintained at a low cost so the owner can charge a reasonable fee but still make a profit," said Hurdzan.

According to Hurdzan, building a course with the junior in mind takes him back to the basics of course design. "When you have beginners, you have to make sure it has some playability. The goal is building something that is agronomically solid, something the owner can maintain."

Hurdzan has supplied Champion with the routing for the project, which will be built on top of Champions existing nine-hole course.

For Champion, having Hurdzan on board offers substantial leverage as he approaches The First Tee for funding. His focus is simple—give the family a range of affordable golfing environments from which to choose.

"Dad's getting ready to go and play on a Saturday morning. Why can't he take his 6-year old?" said Champion. "The idea is to get the kids involved at 6- or 10-years old. Our idea of junior golfers is 13- and 14-year olds. That's too old. Soccer is

getting them when they're 6. Baseball is getting them when they're 6."

Word from The First Tee is forthcoming.

"They're compiling a list of the most suitable candidates for aid," added Champion. "They need to see who's out there and separate the dreamers from the ones who have the resources to pull it off."

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