Not your normal backyard

One of three greens Carter Morrish designed for Bill O’Connor on an estate overlooking Malibu.

‘Seven or eight years ago, when the madness was at its height, many so-called courses were laid out over private grounds...’

— Van Tassel Sutphen in The Outing Magazine, 1906

By MARK LESLIE

The current rage of building putting greens, and entire golf holes, on a person’s property is not new, but rather a second coming of sorts. Two decades after Sutphen wrote those words in The Outing Magazine, Donald Ross laid out Overhills Golf Course on the Rockefeller estate at Pinehurst, N.C. But in the ensuing 70 years not much was heard of personal practice greens — until now.

Today’s second coming of “estate golf courses” is one of often more modest pretensions and dimensions than their grander ancestors. Twenty years ago, according to one study, not more than 10 percent of golf courses had putting greens. Today, seven years after Sutphen’s words, far more people have the land for and can afford a single putting green, or a three- or six-hole practice facility.

“There is a big push everywhere to put in golf greens,” said Rees Jones, who designed a course for an Atlantic Golf Club near New York. “I worked with Dennis Griffiths, and I had a 1,000-square-foot green and a handful of tees 30 yards away outside their teaching station,“ he said.

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Continentalism. I’d like to go a little farther and spread the word that members of the ASGCA are the best architects. Some people worry about do-it-yourself golf courses or architects. I think if we show we’re the best, we don’t have to worry about all the pretenders any more. As a society, we’ve done a lot of positive environmental efforts. We design the very best golf courses, and satisfy the needs of our clients, which is important to me.

Some people want affordable golf courses, cheap because they don’t have enough money to build them. Some want spectacular and they have deep pockets. And some want spectacular but don’t have the money. As architects, it’s our charge to be creative enough to develop a golf course that can be both spectacular and affordable. It may not be as spectacular as some of the $30-million courses built today, but it can be enough different, creative and new that it will attract golfers. At the same time it has to be “maintainable” and “affordable” — the million-dollar words. It’s smart planning, by what I think is the best group of designers, that will save time and money and satisfy our clients’ needs.

Another thing I find today regarding design is, we have to get away a little from being so defined in our design.

GCN: What do you mean?
BL: We hear a lot when we get into golf course renovation and new courses where they’re trying to watch budgets. They say, “We don’t need a bunker there; nobody would hit it there.” Or, “We want bunkers that will define the fairways, only in the landing areas.” Some people want to minimize the fairways to reduce maintenance costs. I think we have to get away from that and get back to some of the traditional designs that were deceptive and elusive. In yesteryears they used grass or sand cross-bunkers, swales, dips and rolls to give a different look as opposed to big mounds and chocolate drop golf courses on which people get carried away. At the same time, we have to remember that the people playing golf today don’t always like deception and elusion. They may want to play in less than four hours for less than $25 and not lose any golf balls. You have to understand who your client is and develop a product for them.

If you’re working for a municipal, you can design a course that is able to hold a local or state or regional tournament. If you can do that, you will satisfy the needs of all the golfers in the area.

I have seen a lot of public golf courses that hold tournaments that are very successful, and it’s because of the creativity of the architects who added multiple tees, the option of where to land the ball on the fairways, options on the greens for multiple pin placements, bunkers in different areas to guard different portions of the greens, and swales and dips and small berms to challenge the golfer to play a shot to a certain part of the fairway or green.

How many people think you need 150 acres for a golf course? You never know. Fitting the course to the site is the most important thing in developing a really good golf course.

It’s also our challenge to design a course that can be maintained to the point where people say, “I like the beauty of this course as well as the challenge and the creativity in the design.”

GCN: There is so much renovation work going on, and it is a specialty of yours. How important are renovations to the golf industry as a whole?
BL: Tremendously important. One of the reasons for the big renovation boom is the competition from the new golf course developments. We’ve seen so many times where members at older courses have fiddled away on little things to try to improve their course and really have not done much. Some new developer comes to town who is going to build an upscale course, and the old club turns around and does a major renovation. They needed it 20 years ago, but now they finally do it because of the competition. There are courses in Chicago where we battled to get in forward tees for ladies, but some of those old, traditional courses have a solid member-
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and are not concerned about change. Other courses that may not have the solid backing and are worried about competition, end up doing renovation work. We find that doing renovations in a big chunk is best way. It’s something new, something different that always attracts people. One of the reasons people do not want to change their golf course, other than dollars, is the disturbance. They want it done in winter or at night, but don’t take it out of play. That’s just not feasible, especially where you have a short growing season. We want to be able to seed rather than sow a lot of the areas. You need to use that grassing time in the fall. So you have to take the course out of play all at once and get it finished. The disturbance is done. You have a new product and it’s like having a new golf course. They don’t have to worry about doing a little every year.

People look at Augusta National, see perfect and think their course should look like that. No matter how good the superintendent is, there are golf courses that just can’t be maintained like that — even if you had the money — because of poor drainage, poor grasses, poor subsoil, or all of the above. Add proper drainage and the newest grasses and other changes, and all of a sudden you have a product that can compete with the new courses. And you already have the maturity of trees; you have the members; and it gives the club new life. It’s neat how excited members get to get back and play their course.

**GCN:** Are these clubs feeling pressure to keep up with the Joneses?

**BL:** Yes, I think so. And it begins with everybody seeing the new courses and how special they are. They’re on the covers of magazines, along with the best new course lists. Newspapers call and ask about our new golf courses. They don’t ask about courses we built 15 years ago. When you renovate an old course it becomes a new course and becomes competitive.

If you’re looking at a golf course that doesn’t have to worry about competition, the one thing that starts people thinking about doing a renovation is if there is a maintenance problem: poor drainage, poor turf, too many trees. Once they look at that problem, they think, “Now let’s take a look at everything.”

We do a lot of bunker projects. People feel the size is fine and the location is fine, but it needs new sand. It’s too soft or too firm or doesn’t drain.

**GCN:** What, specifically, do most clubs want done to facelift their courses?

**BL:** The number-one thing is the putting green. If you have a superintendent who can take care of the greens, whether clay soil aerified and top dressed over the years, or brand new sand-based, their priority is to get a green that is firm, smooth, fast and true. A good superintendent can maintain quality old-style greens.

Members, then, feel the greens are fine but the green surrounds (bunkers and grass around the greens) are poor. You can make a major difference in the look of a golf course by changing the green surrounds. We do a lot of work not changing putting surfaces, but reshaping the surrounds, redoing the bunkers, perhaps lowering the area around it to give it the feeling of an elevated green. Members think we changed the whole green, but we didn’t.

That gives you a big bang for your buck, a good-looking product. Also, you can change its playability and maintainability.

We also get a lot of call for multiple tees, and for adding a tee at a different angle of attack. Another factor that is so important is management of the markers on the tees. A lot of people shove the red markers all the way to the front and the blue markers all the way to the back and never change them. I say, move those markers, putting the white back to the blues on some days when the wind is at your back or the course is playing fast, or moving the blues forward if it is a slow-playing day, or moving the markers from the left tee to the right tee to get a different-looking golf hole.

These are things the designer considers when setting up the golf course.

**GCN:** Do your designs have a...
LOVES PARK, Ill. — The interaction between municipalities and private country clubs therein is generally limited to tax collection. However, with help from Lohmann Golf Designs, the City of Loves Park and Forest Hills Country Club have together killed two birds with one stone.

Based in nearby Marengo, Lohmann Golf Designs (LGD) has overseen construction of three retention ponds at Forest Hills that improved playability at the course while also providing much-needed stormwater detention capacity for the city of Loves Park.

"Forest Hills had a major drainage swale running across the entire golf course," explained Jay Wille, the LGD senior architect who oversaw the project. "During any substantial rain storm, flowing water would run through the swale, causing unsightly erosion, unplayable conditions and continual maintenance problems. As it happened, the city also needed to expand its stormwater confinement capability. We were able to provide a dual solution."

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BL: More often than one might think, municipalities and private clubs have compatible goals when it comes to land use,” said Bob Lohmann, founder and president of LGD and its sister construction company, Golf Creations. “Jay and I thought it would be a win-win for everyone, and LGD worked closely with the engineering firm — Hanson Engineers of Rockford — to ensure the integrity of the golf course was not compromised.

"Those holes look far more attractive now," said Wille, "and they’re not nearly so soggy."

Soil generated from the pond excavation was used to build several new tees, a new practice range and target green. Indeed, the practice tee was substantially enlarged, while extensive new mounding now screens the range from an adjacent road and tennis courts.

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particular “Lohmann fingerprint?”

BL: No, and I don’t think I ever will. I’ve learned from seeing other people’s work and talking to clients to see what they want and applying what I know and apply it to their site. I worked for nine years for Ken Killian and Dick Nugent. They taught me a lot about golf course design and construction. I took that experience and, as time passed, I changed some. Your best design is always going to be your next design. You learn from each project, and when you go back, you see things you would tweak to improve.

GCN: Do you have a favorite designer?

BL: I always say my favorite designers are all the dead ones. That way you don’t offend anybody. You learn from all those people, but you never know if it’s really their work, or their associates’, or a superintendent’s, or a golf pro’s, or whoever. Because there’s always something a little different on every course you visit.

The key is to be creative, provide options, and make whatever option you create fit the site and the client’s needs. We tell people it’s their course and we direct them and lead them through all the planning and construction to create a course they will like. But if they want to do something that is out of space, we tell them it will not work.

We know they want to buy a suit but they have to determine what color they want, so to speak.

There are different options: grasses, soil mixes, and different ways people design golf courses. If you satisfy your client’s needs, you’ve accomplished everything you’re asked to do.