Turning cigarettes into golf clubs: a stroke of genius

A stroke of genius: Turning a smelly, cancer-causing, room-polluting substance — tobacco — into the benefactor of something refreshing, timeless and downright wholesome.

The genius: Minnesota's governor before Jesse Ventura took office: Arne Carlson.

The act of genius: Using states' tobacco company settlements to fund new First Tee projects, which make the game more available to beginning golfers, especially youths.

With various groups around the country digging deep into their personal pockets to finance youth programs and facilities, the tobacco windfall is a welcome one that should be sought in every state.

Republican governors have introduced the most innovative ideas in the country the last six or eight years, so it was no surprise to learn that Carlson appropriated $3.1 million of Minnesota's tobacco settlement bonanza to fund four to seven First Tee projects around the state.

Since most states have earmarked their "tobacco dollars" for youth or education programs, The First Tee appears to be a perfect fit.

"Tobacco dollars are great." First Tee Executive Director Tod Leiwke told the American Society of Golf Course Architects last month. "Why shouldn't First Tee step up for those dollars?"

Indeed, according to First Tee Director of Resources Len Stachits, "We're working on that. We've turned our attention to statewide initiatives."

In Kentucky, the governor has already signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to put First Tee facilities in eight state parks in which the state is either building or renovating golf courses.

In Illinois, the governor's staff is talking about 13 First Tee sites.

And in both Tennessee and Texas, officials are in the beginning stages of developing statewide initiatives.

The funding source varies, said Stachits, adding: "In Kentucky a lot of the monies come from the education and tourism budgets. But tobacco money is a source we are going to vigorously pursue."

Any problems with that pursuit? None, except that "every other nonprofit organization on the face of the earth" is chasing that money as well, Stachits said.

Reasons for optimism? "We think that with the wholesome values golf promotes, we are a worthy recipient," he added.

Multiply seven projects times 50 states and, voilà, you have 350 facilities. Sounds fine.

Harkening back to the early 1900s when a young Francis Ouimet won the U.S. Open in 1913 and won the hearts of Americans, golf course architect and historian Geoffrey Cornish told his colleagues that the ensuing golf boom lasted from the end of World War I until the Great Depression. Then — in their own generations — came Arnold Palmer and then Tiger Woods.

"The next Francis Ouimet, Arnold Palmer, Tiger Woods is perhaps a kid in your neighborhood," Cornish said. "Encourage whoever and whenever you can." • • •

Other Cornishisms:

• "A golf architect who hasn't studied the links is like a divinity student who hasn't studied the Bible."

• "There have never been so many young dynamic architects as today." (Cornish said that in 1939 only 41 course architects were on the face of the earth"

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• So, the Stimpeter Epidemic (related to the Augusta National Syndrome) continues unabated. The latest evidence: A green committee chairman was seen with his own Stimpeter in hand, checking green speeds on his course.

Where will it end? I can see it now. The year is 2002 and Bernhard Langer, instead of just plum-bobbing, pulls his trusty Stimpeter from his bag before determining the direction and force of his putt...