

Champions ugly stepchild undergoing metamorphosis

By FRANCES G. TRIMBLE

The conversation between golf course architect Tom Fazio and Jack Burke of Houston about the remodeling of Champions Golf Club's Jackrabbit course began in 1986 when Fazio was working on a layout at Barton Creek Club in Austin. In the ensuing period problems with the course, which was originally designed by Fazio's uncle George and opened for play in July 1964, only got worse. Everyone agreed Jackrabbit became an "ugly stepchild."

The course, which according to a Champions Golf Club history was designed with "an Eastern look," has always rewarded length off the tee and an ability to turn the ball. It became particularly difficult when played in a north wind and Jackrabbit's greens, elevated and much smaller than the expansive surfaces found on the Champions' Cypress Creek, were difficult to hit. Other differences between Jackrabbit and Cypress Creek include housing along most holes and street crossings.

By the late 1970s, the course had moderately severe drainage problems, owing primarily to naturally flat terrain and a construction explosion that took place in the FM 1960 area north of Houston. What was a rural area in the early 1960s with one development, one service station, and one grocery market, had become an anti-hill criss-crossed by major thoroughfares and dotted with subdivisions and malls.

On-course housing also affected Jackrabbit. Once dwellings were built, there

was an added problem with real-estate property lines and out-of-bounds situations created by those lines. The atmosphere was claustrophobic once cart paths were built, although, for many years, Jackrabbit remained the only Champions layout with trails. When rains came, which they invariably do in Houston, play shifted to the course with paths, making a difficult maintenance situation nearly impossible.

Jackrabbit, which plays at 7,000 yards and some think is a more difficult test than Cypress Creek, became an afterthought. Several fairways were used for parking during tournaments. Members grumbled about conditioning. Yet, there never seemed to be a good time for a facelift.

Jackrabbit's moment has arrived. Phase I of remodeling will begin soon, according to course superintendent Charles Joachim, "in the first quarter of 2000."

The back nine of Jackrabbit will be remodeled and completed in late fall 2000 and work on the front nine will commence in early 2001. Joachim said nothing is being done to Jackrabbit "that isn't absolutely beneficial."

The superintendent, who has been at Champions since 1985, said: "Primary play areas will be moved away from out-of-bounds as much as possible. A drainage system will be established and the irrigation water storage capacity will be doubled. All-weather putting surfaces will be constructed; a modern irrigation system will be installed. Concrete service roads/paths will be connected. The best turfgrass will be planted on all primary playing areas."

Andy Banfield, the point man for Fazio Golf Course Designers, Inc., agreed that all changes are improvements and that the overall plan is basic — fundamental.

"Deepening the lakes will create more topographical relief and more dramatic looking golf holes," Banfield said.

He is confident that visual separation of real-estate and golf areas can be achieved and that the changes to holes will encourage better golfers to use more strategy.

For instance, the 18th hole, now a shortish par-5, will become a long par-4. The green will be moved forward, allowing a lake on the golfer's right to be more of a threat.

The teeing ground for the 10th hole will be placed where the 18th green is now, and No. 10, a par-5 that doglegs to the left, will become somewhat longer. A lake that now sits rather inconspicuously behind the 10th green will be more apparent — not only on the 10th hole, but also on the par-4 12th.

Joachim agreed that the 12th, which was never long, became a "nothing" hole with the loss of a pine tree which threatened the right side of the landing area. The lake greenside left was little or no threat.

"After renovation," said Joachim, "the water will definitely be in play. At least half the pin placements will be behind the lake which will toughen the hole considerably."

Banfield and Joachim agree a dry creek that once crossed the property and drained the housing development west of Champions Drive, had become more of an eyesore than a water feature.

"When George Fazio came," said Joachim, "he wanted that creek to meander, to be like a bayou you might find in Louisiana that filled after rain and emptied in dry weather."

What was once a creek, has become, over time, a wide, grass-covered swale

Continued on next page



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Berlin course gains nine-hole addition

BERLIN, Germany — Essen-based golf course architects Deutsche Golf Consult (DGC) are relishing the opportunity to create a unique extension at Berliner Golf Club Gatow. The existing nine-hole layout was built by the Royal Air Force in the late 1960s and has developed into a parkland layout typical of central-southern England.

DGC was awarded the contract to extend the course to 18 holes and build more suitable practice facilities. Seven hectares of new land, in the shape of quarries and former open-cast mines, were made available. While offering versatile terrain, the quarries posed a problem of continuity for DGC architect Rainer Preißmann said: "If the former coal mine is to be used as a topographic world to experience, the design of the old golf course can only be conditionally integrated into the extension.

"By integrating the old golf course into both half rounds, the familiar golfing environment will suddenly throw up totally new challenges and turn the game of golf (on the entire grounds) into a distinctive experience."

Ugly stepchild

Continued from previous page

that is as straight as a yardstick.

The swale will revert to the feature that George Fazio once envisioned.

In the 30 years since the course opened, governmental agencies have been added to watchdog the area's water situation. One of those is the Houston-Galveston Subsidence District. Joachim said the district controls the amount of water Champions can use and attaches a surcharge when the amount is exceeded.

"That is why the state-of-the-art irrigation system is going in and why the lakes are being deepened," he said.



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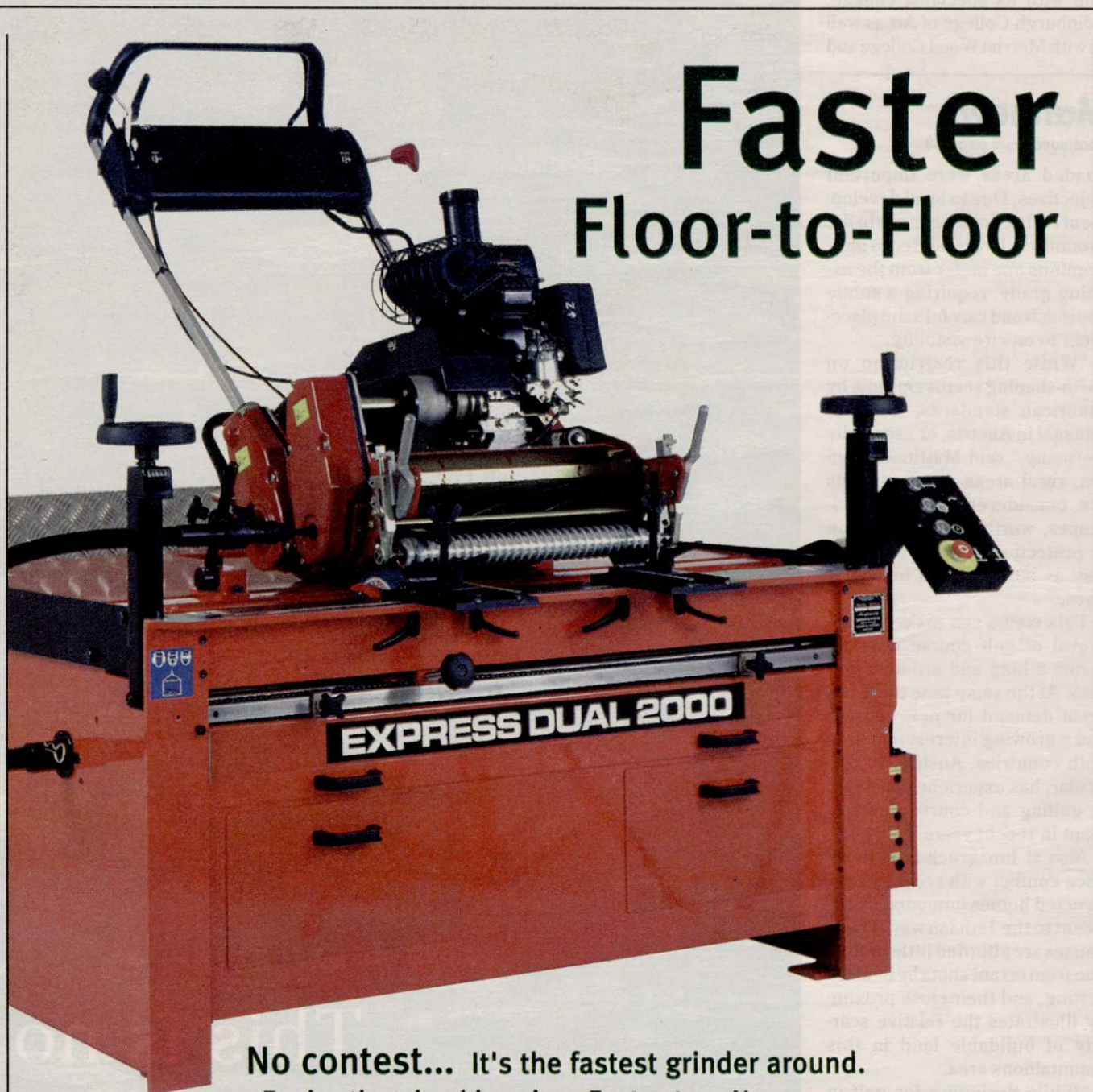
It is the dramatic contouring of the former coal reserve ground that will be immediately recognizable, Preißmann said.

"The pit will be particularly attractive from an aesthetic point of view and will, at the same time, have an explosive sporting effect once integrated into the fairway concept," he added. "This situation is certainly unique in Germany and can, therefore, become a trademark for the golf course of the Berliner Golf Club Gatow."

Work is due to start this spring.



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