How risky is your course?

Once upon a time, long before Tiger Woods arrived on the scene, back when Arnold Palmer was building his "army," golf was a genteel sport. Doctors played it on Wednesday afternoons and the plaid-pants set came out on weekends. It was not a game for "the masses." The courses weren't crowded. Most players knew how to swing a club. And the "wild hack" was a figure of some disrepute and amusement. (I should know. I was one.) Little remains of that world now. Public courses are packed, and wild hacks have proliferated like dandelions.

I recently played a course called Raspberry Falls, in Virginia. A foursome ahead of us was firing ugly shots one and sometimes two fairways over, often taking 10 minutes to hunt around for their balls. I didn't see a single drive land anywhere near a fairway, but I did see several near-misses of nearby players. When we caught up to this foursome at a backed-up par-3, they explained their agonizing pace by saying they were "paying for money."

With guys like that on the loose, it's no surprise that golf courses have become more hazardous than ever. It's anybody's guess how many players are injured by errant shots - the National Golf Foundation keeps no statistics on that. In the United Kingdom alone, however, insurance companies estimate that 8,000 to 10,000 people every year are admitted to hospitals after being hit by wild shots.

I bring this up in the context of a story on the front page this month. A Virginia course called Lansdowne Resort Golf Club (not far from Raspberry Falls) recently settled $7.5 million on a man who walk or work.

That's not because someone has been injured, but because of the climate of wild hacks on the loose nowadays. And that's the problem. Courses that got away with questionable designs when the average golfer was shorter, but they can sell tee times up "till four o'clock."

Even though the course management believed the set-up was safe (they have since changed it), it evidently wasn't - not with the caliber of wild hacks on the loose nowadays. And that's the problem. Courses that got away with questionable designs when the average player was competent now confront a much different situation. "Crowded courses and crazy shots have changed everything," said Mims. "You see guys driving around with a case of beer in the cart, and they'd go as far as one run you as hit you with a golf ball."

In our litigious culture, you can't be too cautious. "I've had lots of calls from country clubs since the case hit the press," said Gary Mims. "It's not because someone has been injured, but because of similar issues. On some courses, you have chipping greens that face.

Good-bye Sunbelt, hello Snowbelt

As the golf markets in the South and Southwest are reaching saturation, more golf course management firms are now looking to the North and Northeast, sensing opportunity.

There are many advantages to owning and operating courses in the Northeast and Midwest, according to Golf Property Analysis principal Larry Hirsh. "There are many operational issues that affect profitability," he said in September's issue of Golf Course News. "In the South, they have to be open all year long, and maintained all year long. In many cases... people don't want to play golf in the summertime, but that's when they have the most tee times to sell because of the daylight. In the North, the playing season is shorter, but they can sell tee times up 'till four o'clock."

This is one reason why Bob Husband, who head of acquisitions-minded Heritage Golf Group, is planning to sell the Snowbelt as the company grows. (See story on page 27.) "The North is attractive," he said, "because even though the season is shorter, the courses are packed all summer and then you have the snow down in the winter. Some of the clubs that I have seen in the North make more money because in the winter the costs go away. In Arizona, though, when it is hot and people don't want to play, you still have to operate the course."

He can shorten playing seasons and long, cold winters possibly add up to larger operational profits.

One reason is that the number players and participation rates are just as compelling as the operational advantages. According to the National Golf Foundation's 2000 Golf Participation in the United States survey, the East North Central (Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio) region of the country has the most golfers (nearly 6 million), the second highest participation rate (15.6 percent) and saw the most rounds (212.8 million) in 1999. The West North Central region (North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri) rang up the highest participation rate, 15.7 percent, and rates for the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions both topped 11 percent.

With a large and active golfing population, as well as access to major cities, opportunities in the Snowbelt clearly exist.

"You have to pick your spots, but it is a good place to be," Husband said. "There is always talk about people moving out of cold climates into the Sunbelt. But there are also people who have roots in the North and who want to live there to stay close to family and friends."

Del Webb Corp. is looking to cash in on this reality with its new golf community outside of Chicago. Sun City Huntley is the company's first development outside of the Southwest. "So many of our buyers in the Sunbelt come to us from the Midwest," said John DeLozier, vice president of golf operations. "We felt that our brand was well known and recognized in this market and the demographics were there."

Look for golf course owners and operators to exploit this market as we move into 2001.

John was a regular contributor to Southern Golf magazine for 12 years, before its recent closing, and has delivered lectures on golf-related landscaping all over the world. We're delighted to have John on the related team at GolfCourse News. His first column appears on page 8.

HOUSE OF CORRECTIONS

In last month's issue, in a front-page article about the new Dragon course at Gold Mountain, Calif., the architect was incorrectly identified. Robin Nelson designed the Dragon, not Robin Freeman. Nelson has been involved in designing more than 100 courses worldwide, including numerous layouts in Asia and the South Pacific. He recently moved his headquarters from Hawaii to Mill Valley, Calif.

We deeply regret the mistake.
MAILBAG

NICKLAUS AND WILSON DESIGNS

To the editor:

An article in your September issue reports on the joint venture formed by Nicklaus Design and Ernie Els Enterprises. It states that Nicklaus has designed golf courses with Dick Wilson, Pete Dye, and Desmond Muirhead. Dick Wilson died in 1965. Was Nicklaus designing golf courses in the early 1960s? Although Dick Wilson remodeled Scioto, Nicklaus' home course, I don't believe the two ever worked together. However, Nicklaus did become a friend to Dick's partner, Joe Lee of Boyton Beach, Fla. If Nicklaus designed a course with Wilson, which one was it?

Thanks,
Joe Jemsek
Denver

P.S. Dick Wilson's passing was a terrible loss for Golf. His designs have stood the test of time at courses like Cog Hill #4, Bay Hill, Doral, and Pine Tree, regarded as the greatest flat course in the world. If Wilson, who died at 61, had lived into his nineties like Jones, there is no telling what he could have accomplished.

Editor's note: Jack Nicklaus never designed a course with Dick Wilson. His first course, co-designed with Pete Dye, was Harbour Town Golf Links (S.C.), which opened in 1970. We regret the error.

TOO MANY GOLF COURSES

To the editor:

I'm writing about your editorial in the September issue. I agree with you and the National Golf Foundation (NGF) that courses are in for a tough road. But I find it funny that the NGF waits to say there are too many courses till after the fact. It's easy to say the boat is going to sink after it sinks. The NGF makes its money by selling its books on building and running courses, which I believe makes them biased.

We started building our course in 1988 and opened in June 1990. If we had not owned the property and built it ourselves we would have a tough time making it. We bought and read what the NGF printed before deciding to build a course. I think they were right back then to say we needed more courses. But as we moved into the middle 90s, the NGF was still saying that we needed hundreds of new courses a year to meet demand, when people in the industry knew better. As little as a year ago, NGF was still saying we need more courses.

Now they say that courses must do a better job to bring out more golfers, and to do “dynamic pricing,” which means lower our prices. I don't believe the NGF knows the first thing about running a golf course.

James L. Hawk, Jr.
President, Jade Greens Golf Course
Auburn, Wash.

Risky golf courses

Continued from previous page

highways, driving ranges that run out onto fairways. Their lawyers are concerned about exposure. But the calls lead me to believe that people haven't really given a whole lot of thought to this issue, to the degree of injury that can happen.

"The point is, when the owner or manager of a golf course is aware of a hazard - even a potential hazard - they've got to take some action," Mims said. "A golf ball travels at 120 to 170 miles an hour. If you get hit in the head with that, you better hope it's the hard part of your head."