

INTERNATIONAL REPORT

Extreme golf: Fream breaks ground in Sahara Desert

By JAY FINEGAN

TOZEUR, Tunisia — You have to hand it to Ron Fream. The man isn't afraid of a challenge.

This past New Year's Day, the California-based golf architect broke ground here at this date palm oasis in the Sahara Desert. If work proceeds as planned, the Sahara's first 18-hole course will open for play next winter.

Although Tozeur has an airport, about a dozen hotels and a mainly Berber population of 20,000, it seems rather remote. It sits on a caravan route from Timbuktu to Carthage — near today's Tunis — that dates back 3,000 years.

The Mediterranean coast is four hours to the north. Timbuktu lies 1,000 miles southwest through the Algerian Sahara. The landscape is so other-worldly that film-maker George Lucas bought 1,000 acres near here where he shoots his "Star Wars" movies.

Weather conditions can be tough. The area gets only about two inches of rain per year. In the summer, daytime temperatures reach 122 degrees. But in the winter, Fream said, it's delightful. "It will be a balmy 77 degrees here, when it's below freezing in Paris or Helsinki and the days are only five hours long," he said. "North African courses are like the Palm Springs of Europe. It's becoming kind of an 'in' thing to go into the desert on safaris."

Construction conditions are a bit unusual, too. "There is a challenge just getting design ideas across when the local labor crew has no understanding of what a golf course is," the architect said.

But Fream has prepared a master plan to clear the site-related hurdles of sandstone outcroppings, eroded valleys, fine drifting sand, little existing vegetation and a rather demanding water source.

15 YEARS TO GROUND-BREAKING

Fream is no stranger to these parts. He has made more than 40 visits to Tunisia



A rendering of the first hole at Ron Fream's Oasis Golf Club

since he first started building courses in North Africa almost 30 years ago.

Indeed, Fream & Dale Golfplan, based in Santa Rosa, Calif., has built seven courses already in Tunisia, including a Cypress Point look-alike called Tabarka on the coast. Together, those courses handle some 300,000 rounds a year.

But those projects pale compared to the building of the Oasis Golf Club. "Somebody in Palm Springs will say, 'Oh, we've built courses in the desert.' I've got a golf course in Palm Springs, too," Fream said. "And doing golf in the desert there is kids' stuff. It's for junior high school boys. I picked this site 15 years ago, and it's taken us that long just to get to ground-breaking."

PASPALUM TO THE RESCUE

Water supply, oddly enough, isn't a major concern. Fream plans to pull about one million gallons a day from a sewage treatment plant located some six miles away. "They agreed to put in a bigger pipeline," he said, "and we can get up to 4,000 cubic meters a day. That's a lot of water."

Even so, he will limit maintained turf to 60 or 70 acres. "It will be target golf," he said, "with nothing but the raw sand around. We've been working with Ronny Duncan at the University of Georgia, and we're trying to use their new Seashore Paspalum. We're establishing a nursery to produce it. We'll try to use the new Sea Isle 2000 for putting surfaces, and either the Salam or the Sea Isle variety for tees, fairways and maintained roughs."

Why paspalum? Because the treated water from the sewage plant has some 4,000 parts per billion of salt — it's almost as salty as ocean water. Paspalum can handle that degree of salinity.

CAMEL-PULLED CARTS

The heavy construction machinery will come in from Tunis, but Fream will lean heavily on local labor.

"Donkey and camel-pulled carts are common around here, and we'll use them to transport some of the construction materials," he said. "We'll use hand labor for the excavation of trenches and for

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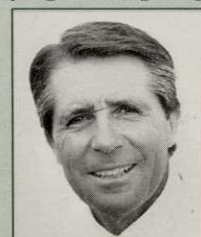
Player's new Links Course has South Africa talking

By JAY FINEGAN

GEORGE, South Africa — Gary Player's new Links Course here has been open only since November, but already it's being favorably compared to such fabled links layouts as Royal Troon, Ballyunion, Prestwick and Royal Birkdale. So lavish has been the praise that the new track will host the PGA Tour's Presidents Cup in 2002.

"The Links resembles these grand links in that it has wind-blown dunes with low-lying areas, giving it a tidal appearance,"

said Chris Davison, a professional golfer who is now director of the course. "Another feature of The Links is its rolling greens, which are not often seen in South Africa. It's set to test the best golfers in the world in every way."



Gary Player

Located between the Indian Ocean and the Outeniqua Mountains on the Western Cape, George is a somewhat isolated resort town on South Africa's scenic Garden Route. It does have an airport, however.

THIRD COURSE AT FANCOURT

The Links is the third Gary Player layout at Fancourt Hotel and Country Club Estate, which took the top prize as 1999's "resort of the year" for all of Africa and the Middle East in the Hertz International Golf Travel Awards. The fourth Player design here, the Academy Course, will be completed later in 2001.

The resort's owners, a German couple named Hasso and Sabina Plattner, purchased the property in 1994, when its fortunes were sagging. The estate featured only 27 holes of golf at the time. Since then, thanks to large infusions of cash and the efforts of the Gary Player Design Co., the Fancourt complex has become an aristocrat of South Africa's golf destinations. The new course will only enhance that reputation.

"The Links has satisfied and far exceeded my design philosophy, which was to capture the essence of what makes great traditional links so special," said Hasso Plattner. "I believe that The Links will provide golfers with the most natural golf experience — which, to me, is what golf is all about."

AN ALL-WEATHER CHALLENGE

More than 700,000 cubic meters of earth were moved to turn flat

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Sparrebosch opens, offering staggering Indian Ocean views

By JACQUIE STAFFORD

KYNSNA, South Africa — Continued development and recent course openings here in Cape Providence have offered up new experiences for the golfing connoisseur. Three courses, two new and one longer, more established course, provide wildlife, variety and, of course, golf at the Steenberg, Arabella, and Sparrebosch layouts.

For sheer stunning scenery, the Ron Fream-designed Sparrebosch is hard to beat — anywhere in the world. Set on the Knysna Heads overlooking the Indian Ocean, the views are breathtaking. This is a true links-style course and the rough is Cape fynbos (similar to Scottish heather), which local rules treat as a lateral hazard. Apart from the fact that you would never find your ball in it, the rule is to protect the sensitive ecology. All 18



The 14th and 15th holes at Sparrebosch play along oceanside cliffs.

holes have now been completed.

While fairways are generous at Sparrebosch, wayward shots are penalized. However, good ball placement is rewarded. The par-5 first hole offers an eagle opportunity for long-hitters who have to clear a natural forest that impinges on the fairway. Fortunately for the shorter hitter, or the simply fainthearted, there's a dropping zone on the other side of the forest. So all is not lost right at the

beginning. The 14th and 15th holes, situated along steep cliffs, are a truly memorable experience.

The course makes full use of the natural, wild terrain, creating a long layout. A golf car is not only a good idea, but compulsory. To speed up play, the club provides a nourishing roll and a cool drink in order to eliminate waiting at the "halfway house." Each golf car comes supplied with a full chest of ice.

Reef Course joins Dick Wilson design on Grand Bahama

By JAY FINEGAN

GRAND BAHAMA ISLAND, Bahamas — A new Robert Trent Jones Jr. layout has opened for play here on Grand Bahama — the first new course to be built in the Bahamas since 1969. The Reef Course joins the Lucayan Country Club course, a Dick Wilson design that dates back to 1962.

Both courses are part of the newly refurbished and renamed Our Lucaya Resort, the largest and most expensive Caribbean property in development at more than \$400 million. The resort also recently opened a Butch Harmon School of Golf, one of only two in the world. Harmon currently coaches Tiger Woods.

The Reef Course, a daily-fee facility, is a links-style track that stretches to 6,920 yards from the championship tees. It lies atop a course built in 1968, which went defunct in the early 1980s.

"It lay fallow for close to 20 years," said Ty Butler, vice president at the Jones golf architectural firm and lead designer on the Reef project. "There were a few resemblances of old bunkers and old greensites, and there were mounds and depressions here and there, but the course was totally overgrown. There was really nothing left of the old design. We came in and completely redid it — new greens, new bunkers. We recontoured

the entire site."

Butler described the course as a resort layout built mainly for the average player. "It's a low-lying, gently rolling course that's not meant to beat anybody up," he said. But he added that it "held its ground pretty well" in the December kickoff event, the two-day Senior Slam, won at nine under by Hale Irwin. It was the first major PGA Tour event in the Bahamas since 1971. In fact, the Senior Slam will be played here at the Reef Course for the next two years.

DECEPTIVELY DIFFICULT

Gary Slatter, director of golf operations for both courses at Our Lucaya, expects the Reef Course to log about 26,000 rounds a year, at the cart-included cost of \$120 for daily-fee players or \$100 for guests at the resort.

"We'll have 1,350 guest rooms here," he said, "with more flights coming in from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom." The island lies 55 miles east of Miami, a mere 35 minutes by air.

Slatter said players might find the Reef Course deceptively difficult. "We have a classic Dick Wilson course here, which is entirely tree-lined," he said. "And we have this new Reef Course, which is more open-looking, although it has 13 lakes. The Wilson course channels your thoughts to hit in a straight line, whereas at the Reef, there's a lot more space around the



The 16th hole at the Our Lucaya Reef Course, on Grand Bahama Island, which opened in December.

greens. But when you miss the green here, all of a sudden you realize, 'Oh geez, there's a lake there, or a bunker.'"

Reef Course superintendent Hiram Hield, a 26-year veteran of Our Lucaya (formerly called the Lucayan Resort), has planted the greens with Tifdwarf and the fairways and roughs with 419 Bermudagrass. He irrigates the layout with well water, but the system is also hooked up with an effluent source. "Grand Bahama has a good fresh water supply under it, compared to the other islands," said Slatter.

CHINESE CONTROLLED

In addition to the two courses and the

guest accommodations, the Our Lucaya resort features a yacht marina, an 80-outlet marketplace, an "African village" and numerous restaurants. A 30,000-square-foot casino, with 30 gaming tables, will add a James Bond touch to the resort when it opens this spring.

The entire complex is owned by Hong Kong-based Hutchinson Whampoa, one of the world's largest shipping and property companies. The firm has bought Grand Bahama's main airport and harbor. It also owns the shipping terminals at both ends of the Panama Canal. Our Lucaya is the company's first non-Asian resort venture.

Player

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land into undulating, dune-style terrain. Each hole received attention to detail to ensure that the overall balance in terms of length, position of hazards and shot values are in harmony. As a result, the 7,234-yard layout will pose a challenge in all weather conditions.

"Our brief from the Fancourt owners was for a course that will rate in the world's top 100 within five years, and we intend to achieve that goal," said Phil Jacobs, the chief designer for the Player group. "It is the only links-style course in the country planted with cool season grasses," primarily Kentucky Blue, rye, fescue and bent. The greens are Dominant Bent.

"Words cannot describe this project," said superintendent Kosie Mentz. "All credit must go to Hasso and Sabine Plattner and the Gary Player Company for creating such an awesome project. I have no doubt in my mind that The Links will be the best maintained golf course in the country."

THE KILIMANJARO HOLE

The Links features some extraordinary holes. The par-3 second — "Lang Drop" — for example, has a bunker in the heart of an enormous green.

"We included the bunker in the green to break it up," Player explained. "The front left of the green is sloped severely, so the golfer can use the contours to get the ball to any part of the green with a putter. You will never be stymied by the trap."

Added designer Jacobs: "This sort of thing is only really associated with links

courses, and links breaks the rules of design. We want to keep the element of quirkiness that is characteristic of links golf."

Most surprising is the amount of elevation change on the course. "There is a lot of movement in the fairways as well as the dunes," wrote Stuart McLean, in *Golf Digest's* South Africa edition. "You find yourself playing both uphill and downhill at times, most dramatically to the raised green at number 10, aptly named 'Kilimanjaro,' a hole which is straight out of Royal Portrush — one of the few Irish courses to host the British Open."

Player himself drew a similar comparison. "At this new course, we'll be taking South Africans back to the roots of golf and letting them play a British Open of their own," he said.

CARTS VERBODEN — ALMOST

The Links is a public course, and it is meant to be walked. Carts are allowed only for medical reasons and must be booked in advance. A "fore caddy" is compulsory for each group of golfers.

Player was gratified that PGA Tour commissioner Tim Finchem had awarded the 2002 Presidents Cup to The Links. "One of our goals with The Presidents Cup is to make it truly an international competition," Finchem said. "By taking it around the world, we are accomplishing that goal and introducing the sport to a new generation of fans."

Player predicted the tournament will prove a huge boon to South African golf and tourism, and said the course is ideal for telecasts. "The magnificent Links Course will be a true test for the world's best golfers," he said, "as well as offering supreme spectator viewing." ■



The 16th hole at Nejapa Country Club in suburban Managua

Nicaragua set to open first course since Sandinista regime

SANTA ROSA, Calif. — Nicaragua's sole golf course, the Nejapa Country Club, is slated to open next April in suburban Managua, near the Central American country's Pacific coast. Designed by Rick Elliott, a Santa Rosa-based architect with Strategic Golf Design (SGD), the championship 18-hole layout rolls gently through open terrain sparsely punctuated with mango and eucalyptus trees.

The only previous course in Nicaragua was destroyed during the communist Sandinista regime of the 1980s. "Tanks were doing donuts on the greens, and then the squatters came and took over the whole course," said John Millhouse, a designer with SGD. "The members got some sort of settlement out of the government for losing the property, years after the fact, and

that money, plus whatever membership drive they've had, formed the basic funding mechanism."

The land at Nejapa is cut with three small ravines and one large ravine that meander through the site, providing enhanced visual drama and added challenge on seven holes. Three sets of tees offer plenty of length variation, from 4,800 yards at the shortest to 6,800 yards from the blue markers.

The course design includes mass plantings of tropical flowers and evergreen shade trees to curtail the winds, which blow daily at about 20 miles per hour. Native grasses and wildflowers will dominate in out-of-play roughs. The course will feature Tifdwarf hybrid Bermudagrass on greens and Primavera seeded Bermudagrass throughout tees, fairways and roughs.