Munegam breaks ground on Westchester County’s first daily-fee course in 63 years

By PHILIP HALL
NEW CASTLE, N.Y. — It’s been 63 years since a new public golf course opened for play here in Westchester County. Exclusive private clubs abound (there were 59 at last count), but a dense population and real estate prices gone berserk make the development of public-access facilities a virtual impossibility.

This shortage of affordable golf courses is something local players have come to accept. Indeed, the nation gained insight into this regional problem last year when The New York Times published a front-page story on the subject.

But help is on the way.

Ground was broken in June at Hudson Hills Golf Course, an 18-hole daily-fee layout designed by architect Mark Munegam, a partner with Uxbridge, Mass.-based Cornish, Silva and Munegam, Inc.

Developed by Westchester County itself, the course is scheduled to open for play in 2002.

“The main portion of the land we’re using for Hudson Hills used to be a golf course,” explained Munegam. “The club changed its name many times. It was called Pine Ridge when it opened in the 1920s, then Sunset Hills, then Pine Ridge again before it took the name Hudson Hills Golf Club in the mid-1960s.”

The club shut its doors in 1982 and today the course site is totally overgrown.

“We’ve appropriated the most recent name for this new project,” Munegam added, “but we’ve essentially designed a brand new golf course here, a completely new routing. This isn’t a restoration; it’s a reincarnation.”

CONTROLLING GREEN FEES

How do 110 acres sit unused for nearly two decades just 30 miles north of New York City, in the heart of one of America’s most outrageously priced real estate markets?

Well, the club closed down because IBM purchased the property with plans to build a corporate research laboratory there. Those plans never materialized.

Five years ago, the county successfully negotiated to buy the property back. At that time, the county had intended to develop the project privately, via a third-party lease arrangement.

“Eventually, the county decided to develop the course itself,” said Munegam, who recently completed tournament renovations at Chicago’s Olympia Fields Country Club, site of the 2003 U.S. Open. “That was the only way to control green fees. In Westchester County, a private operator could charge just about anything and get away with it.

Better than anyone, county officials recognized the need for affordable golf here.”

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Fream’s Nine Bridges GC puts Gleneagles in Korea

By JAY FINEGAN

JEJU ISLAND, South Korea — Architect Ron Fream has opened his fifth course in Korea since 1984. Nine Bridges Golf Course here on this subtropical ocean resort destination, less than an hour’s flight from Seoul, Tokyo and Osaka, held a soft opening June 1. The layout will hit full swing in August.

Fream said early players have been “very impressed” by the par-72, 18-hole course, which runs to a championship length of 7,200 yards and down to 5,250 from the front pegs. The scenery is “amazing” around the site, said Fream, who noted that volcanic outcroppings line the several creeks that cross the property. The entire island is volcanic.

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Stone Tree
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23 months to complete. Continental Golf Construction Co. of Auburn, Calif., handled the heavy lifting. The great challenge was shaping the 10 holes that play along the flattest part of the golf course. Care was taken to frame each hole with mounding, so only the hole you are playing is in view. “This was a very difficult site to build on, as we could not impact any wetland areas, and these areas continued to be declared even during construction,” Summers said.

To tie this area to the tree-laden hillside portion, more than 13,000 trees were planted along these holes, satisfying a permit requirement to replace — on a three-to-one basis — trees that were taken down from other parts of the course. “Every tree we removed was inventoried by an on-site arborist to determine how many trees we would have to add to other areas,” Summers said. The new trees — live oaks, valley oaks, willows and alders — were mostly placed on the flat, treeless section of the property to give the course more definition.

PLAYING SURFACE
The mounding in the flat areas was another challenge, built as the mounds were on bay mud that behaved like Jell-O. “We moved over 300,000 cubic feet of dirt on the property and imported over 180,000 cubic feet of sand to add a full sand cap to the course,” said Harvey Lundershausen of Capital Golf Construction. “All of this took a lot of time.”

According to Pryeski, the effort paid off. “We have a firmer playing surface during the winter — our rainy season,” he said. The course offers bentgrass greens and a rye/bluegrass mix on the fairways and tees. Water comes into play on several holes, with six acres of man-made wetlands, three ponds and two creeks. “There are only 40 bunkers, because the wetlands, hill-sides and water features add enough challenge,” said director of golf Soczka.

The difficulty of the design and construction lead to the development of Stone Tree’s motto — “A handcrafted classic.”

Munegam
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Munegam — a member of the board of governors at the American Society of Golf Course Architects — has become a familiar name in Met area golfing circles. His recent designs include High Bridge Hills GC, the North Course at Charleston Springs GC in Millstone Township, and Colt’s Neck Golf and Country Club. All three courses are in New Jersey.

Course construction permits were secured for Hudson Hills back in 1997; Munegam has spent the past two years honing his design plans here in New Castle. Several of the overgrown holes are still discernible, though none will be part of the new Hudson Hills 18.

“We have aerial photographs of the old course, and if you go out in the field you can see everything,” Munegam continued. “You come across these depressions, and if you scrape around you’ll find the old bunker sand. We found a tee sign the other day — a post with fancy wrought-iron work and a board hanging from it. But the writing has been worn away by time.

“The former course was wedged onto just 110 acres, but today we have 150 acres to work with,” he added. “It’s great land, steep in some sections but lovely, rolling terrain with nice views to the west. When we’re finished, I daresay Hudson Hills will be the best public facility in Westchester County.”

A COURSE FOR CLINTON
Much has been written about where Bill Clinton, now a resident of neighboring Chappaqua, will play his golf. Munegam, for one, has a suggestion. “Hudson Hills will definitely be affordable enough for anyone on a government pension,” he quipped.

Having christened four original layouts last year (including partner Brian Silva’s much praised Black Creek Club in Chattanooga, Tenn.), Cornish, Silva and Munegam will open four more original designs in 2001, including Munegam’s LeBaron Hills CC, a private club in Lakeville, Mass.

Also, the Munegam-designed South Course at Charleston Springs will open this fall.

GOLF COURSE NEWS

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