Mungeam 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 Mungeam, a partner with Uxbridge, Mass.-based Cornish, Silva and Mungeam, 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 Mungeam. "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," Mungeam 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 property privately, via a third-party lease arrangement.

"Eventually, the county decided to develop the course itself," said Mungeam, who recently completed tournament renovations at Chicago's Olympic 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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patterned Nine Bridges after a Scottish Highlands style, specifically the Kings Course at Gleneagles. Twenty-five revetted (sod-faced) bunkers punctuate the track, which features creeping bentgrass greens, tees and fairways. Bluegrass and rye semi-roughs fade into fine fescue true roughs.

"We brought in 150,000 cubic yards of sand, by barge, from the Yangtze River in China for all seedbeds," Fream said. "Even the fairways have eight to 10 inches of sand. We also moved more than 2,000 large trees, up to 30 feet tall, as a conservation and transplanting effort. Autumn leaf color is like New England, Japanese maple and Cryptomeria - a type of pine - are the primary trees."

Summer typhoons can pose weather difficulties, Fream pointed out, but the area receives only a foot or two of snow in the winter.

"There's nothing else like this in Korea," he said. "The course is initially for invited guests, but it will accommodate limited holiday play for tourists. The LPGA is slated to play a major international tournament here on Oct. 15. All the leading female players, including some rising Korean stars, will compete for a 1.5-million purse."

LOCAL CONSTRUCTION

The owner of Nine Bridges, a Korean corporation called Cheil Jedang, is a major pharmaceutical manufacturer, with other interests in movie theaters, restaurants and film production. It formerly held a stake in Steven Spielberg's Dreamworks.

Orange Construction, a Korean group, handled the heavy work. "They did a fine job. It's a quality outfit," said Fream's partner David Dale, who did much of the architectural drafting work for the course.