Before You Build That Golf Course . . .

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A well known architect discusses some of the things that should be done or avoided by those who plan to build a course or finance one

(First of two articles)

All over North America land is being cleared and contoured for golf courses. Even though construction has experienced an amazing surge there are many more golfers per course in many sections of U. S. than a decade ago. About 350,000 persons took up the game in 1963. Including both 9- and 18-hole layouts there is now only one golf course for every 900 or so golfers. About half of these courses are member owned country clubs catering to relatively few players.

In the June, 1963, issue of GOLFDOM I had the opportunity to discuss eight points to be considered when a course is built with a profit motive. It was noted that if it is well designed, well built and well kept, a course can gross in excess of $100,000 annually from green fees alone, even in areas where the playing season is 30 weeks or slightly less.

Because of this article numerous inquiries have been made from those who are contemplating course construction, and from banks, insurance companies, financial institutions and federal agencies which are considering course financing. Because others may have similar problems the questions and the answers given are summarized as follows:

1. What is the worst mistake that can be made?

In my opinion the most deadly is inadequate financing. Many outlays are necessary in addition to the course itself.

Furthermore, once the course is open for play, immediate profits are seldom realized. It may take several years be-

Ninth hole and clubhouse of Blue Rock Par 3 at South Yarmouth on Cape Cod, Mass., are seen in the photo above.

A brush and log picker smashes through heavy logs and mud in first phase of construction at the Stratton Mountain, Vt. CC. Giant claws pick up entangled trees and pile them for burning. Geoffrey Cornish designed this course.

"Heavy equipment is making it possible for course builders to conquer the wilderness." — Cornish

(Left) Stumping proceeds on 15th fairway. All the stumps and rocks seen here were hauled away or buried. (Right) On the 16th fairway, a backhoe opens a trench that will become burial place for stumps.

Things are beginning to shape up. Topsoil is being re-spread over the fairway that was chewed up by brush and log picker in photo at top of the page.

fore play approaches capacity. There may even be a year or two when operating expenses are not even met. Because so many outlays can be overlooked during the planning stage, an outline of those required before opening has been prepared. (It will appear in the April issue).

2. Do municipal courses offer unfair competition?

Owners of profit motive golf ventures may dread construction of a new municipal layout in their areas, feeling they will never be able to compete with the publicly owned course. In my experience, the municipal layout and the privately owned fee-type course seldom compete. I know of several cases where municipal courses have been built only a few miles from private ventures. In each case the fears of the private operator have not been justified although the municipal course has attracted large crowds. The truth is that generally there are plenty of golfers for every course, municipal or privately owned.

3. Is the non-equity type of club a sound investment?

Private clubs built with a profit motive where the members hold no equity in the plant are often successful. In their early years they can, however, be money losers.

Non-equity clubs are often particularly difficult to promote in New England, whereas, in neighboring New York, they seem to obtain membership quotas more easily. In sections of the country where non-equity clubs are less readily accepted, it is sometimes best to open them as fee type courses for a few years. Then the decision can be made as to whether or not to go private.

Convert to Private

In actual practice after opening as a fee type course, we find that some group may approach the owner with an attractive proposition to make the course private for their golfers. This saves the owner a tremendous promotional campaign in those lean financial years when membership is building up. While the course is open to the public, construction of the main clubhouse may be delayed until the non-equity club is formed.

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Regarding clubhouses for non-equity clubs, we do find more often than not that golfers who join such a club want a magnificent one. For a 300 family member club this can require 30,000 square feet or more of floor space costing as much as $15.00 per square foot.

There Can Be Pitfalls

It is not my intention to be negative in regard to non-equity clubs. They serve a definite purpose in the golf world and ultimately are nearly always successful. But it is best to point out to potential owners that there can be pitfalls ahead. Not the least of these is that money has to go out for a long time before any subtantial return is realized. Valuable as are the services of the National Golf Foundatiton for all new golf ventures, they are particularly valuable for anyone contemplating a non-equity club. Unless forewarned of future problem, investors soon find they have a tiger by the tail.

4. How quickly will membership reach capacity in such a club and what is capacity?

My own observations in New England are that 100 to 150 members are always obtained easily and quickly at non-equity clubs. But when this point is reached, the eagerness to join always ebbs. To build up to 300 members may take several years. With 18 holes and a 30,000 square foot clubhouse, 300 family members appears to be capacity. Thereafter, rightly or wrongly, the members invariably complain that course and clubhouse are too crowded.

The second part of this article will appear in the April issue of Golfdom.