

# WHY COURSES FAIL

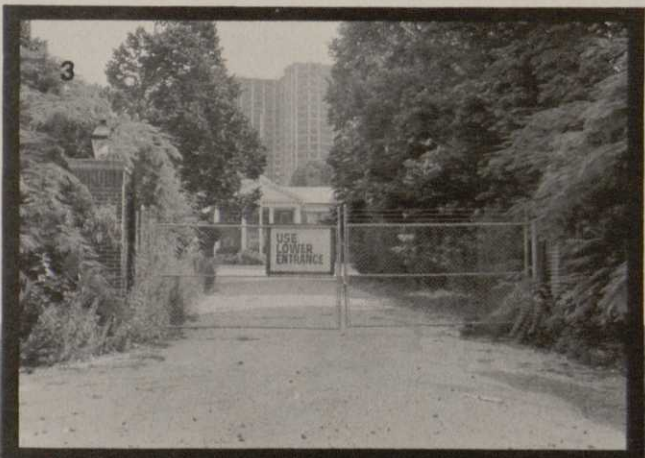
Poor management policies and entrenched attitudes by golf course officials, combined with public need and private profiteering, usually force the end of a golf course

by DOUGLAS LUTZ

Envious eyes view golf's open green spreads as territory fertile for acquisition. As seen by the public sector, those prime lands that green the urban landscape unjustifiably support the sporting activities of only a handful of people. Better use could be made of these acreages. They could produce the much-needed income to help fill local government coffers; help ease the housing shortage; expand crowded college facilities or provide more macadam ribbons to relieve traffic clogged highways.

Private needs give way to public concerns; the few must move over for the many. Again and again the same story is told. The vulnerability of the golfing community lies in the inherent conflict between the private and public sectors. Expansion is an American obsession, belied by hypocritical sentiment. Educational institutions extol the ideal of an education for everyone while unceremoniously acquiring precious greenswards. The corporation, with a little help from industrial park promoters, dangles the lure of more jobs and less taxes, and ends the life of yet another golf course. Housing contractors, mindful of the housing shortage, bulldoze a once-venerable course, and build houses too expensive for most Americans. Highway departments insist more roads are needed to ease traffic-choked highways; slash across a fairway, thus creating more traffic.

To all these special interest groups, the golf course repre-



All the courses pictured here have failed, due to public apathy, industrial expansion, academic encroachment or high-rise building. Lake Hopatcong (bottom, opposite page; photo 4), closed two years ago. Valley View (photo 1) has become headquarters site of the National Biscuit Company. Ferncliffe (photos 2, 6) fell victim to industrial park acquisition. Glen Oaks (photo 3) fell

to luxury housing. Queensborough Community College (photo 5) now occupies the former site of Oakland CC. Unique architectural features built into all these courses can never be duplicated.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUGLAS LUTZ

sents an easy solution to pressing, public needs.

Who supports a golf course when it is threatened by an expressway of doubtful routing? Why doesn't the community appreciate the value of a golf course enough to fight for its survival? Perhaps officials are short-sighted. That the golf course has stood on its superb landscape for 50 years or more has no bearing on their thinking. But the public doesn't attempt to alter official thinking. Why? What is the golf course to most people?

In their minds, they see Private, No Trespassing, Keep Out, Members Only signs. The meaning of these are clear; the public is not wanted. The golf course is interested only in maintaining its privacy, its elitism. Despite the popularity of golf, the golfing community has alienated itself from the community at large. Its welfare, no longer of concern to the public, is easily sacrificed.

When a county needs a college for its education-hungry children, how

strong a protest might be expected if the local government begins condemnation proceedings against a commercial golf course that may be barely holding its own? Its position in the community as a fine example of an outmoded style of architecture does not sway those determined to secure the land for education. Interests of the very youth for whom a scholastic atmosphere will be created, as surely as the plans are announced, are soon to be denied on another level: the elimination of a recreation facility that for many years attracted the community's young as players and as caddies. Ironically, in the same county and concurrently with initial bulldozing operations at the existing course, ground is broken for a new 18 hole course. Hypothetical? Not by a long drive.

In 1968, Bergen County, N.J., condemned Orchard Hills in Paramus, and Bergen County Community College began building on nine of the holes. The other nine were to be operated under a five-year lease. The lease

lasted two years, and Orchard Hills was gone forever.

Land acquired to build Overpeck GC at the other end of the county in Teaneck, N.J., is traversed by Overpeck Creek. Heavy spring rains, always a hazard in this part of the state, cause serious flooding and ultimate damage to the new course. Why the county did not acquire Orchard Hills as a public course and have the school built at the Overpeck site remains a mystery.

Orchard Hills was an excellent hilly course, one of the best in northern New Jersey. Overpeck, by comparison, is flat, dull, almost devoid of trees. Following heavy rains, it is virtually unplayable, causing many days of uncollectable green fees.

A principal villain contributing to the demise of golf courses has always been the educational sector. In New York City's borough of Queens, the 78-year-old fairways of the former Oakland CC are hidden under the Queensborough Community College campus. Any reminder of its past glory as a truly unique example of old-fashioned design and topography can only be found in the clubhouse, which still remains. That, too, is an alteration of its former self; it was rebuilt after a fire in 1912. Currently used for special functions, faculty dining and student club activities, this once-proud Dutch Colonial style mansion now looks down on masses of students who tramp unknowingly across the plateau of Oakland's highest hill, a hill that once supported the incomparable ninth and 18th greens. These were majestic uphill finishing holes that terminated in terraced layers below the beckoning umbrella-decorated outdoor refreshment area.

The acquisition of the property received an assist from another, larger villain. The city in its zealous campaign to ring itself with new and better roadways, condemned part of Oakland in 1958 to make room for housing displaced from the path of the then-building Long Island Expressway (now called the world's largest parking lot). Doubtless, other open territory in the immediate vicinity should have been the choice for relocation, but the city government at that time was not particularly disposed to any considerations of ecology, preservation of a golf course or the wishes of the golfing fraternity. There was, in fact, a blatant

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disregard of opinion conflicting with officialdom's road-building fanaticism.

In 1959, Queensborough Community College took over the remainder of Oakland CC, which was in extremely shaky financial condition as a semi-private course. The inevitability of progress, one supposes, stifled any resistance to the takeover by Oakland's management, even though golf in New York City had begun its popularity swing.

Clearview, a city-owned course, only three miles north of Oakland, had been establishing records as the most popular public course in the world. Oakland should have been the logical candidate for the overflow from Clearview. Instead, that distinction went to infamous Dyker Beach in Brooklyn.

Granted, the full impact of public golf had not as yet descended on the city: the managements at many New York area clubs were then unaware of the potential income soon to be realized, so no effort was made to hold onto golfing facilities. Clearview, as an example of short-sighted management, had been sadly neglected; a factor that drove golfers away. This, plus Oakland's crippling tax burdens, finished her off.

Typically, New York City's parks department took no action to acquire the property as a city park, even though there was enough indicators to show that city facilities were about to be over-utilized.

Another institution of higher learning had set the pace for golf course property acquisition some years earlier in the same general area as the Oakland site.

Hillcrest GC, hemmed in by semi-affluent houses in a section of Queens called Utopia, became the site of St. Johns University. Just to the south of Hillcrest, across Grand Central Parkway, was a particularly affluent neighborhood called Jamaica Estates. It would appear that among the residents of the surrounding communities, there might be enough support to forestall Hillcrest's demise. This was not to be, however, and once again golf was the loser.

In a weed-grown corner of the St. Johns campus, old course buffs can still glimpse through the rusted fence and underbrush one of Hillcrest's greens—perhaps salvageable as a

practice green for student golfers. However, any interest on the part of the institution seems remote.

The section of Queens where St. Johns and Queensborough are located was also home for Pomonok and Bayside Golf Clubs. Neither course could stem the tide of the housing explosion that took place in Queens. Earlier versions of garden apartments, forerunners of today's condominiums, and one and two family brick homes saturated the landscape in the Fresh Meadows area squeezing out both Pomonok and Bayside. Additionally, Bayside was in the path of the projected Clearview Expressway, which was ultimately to lead traffic arteries to and from the planned Throggs Neck Bridge.

In a five to six mile square of Queens, during a short 20-year stretch, six wonderful, old courses were wiped out—Oakland, Pomonok, Hillcrest, Bayside and Idlewild, as well as St. Albans, a private club in the community it was named after, that became a United States Naval hospital during World War II.

The marshy shores of Jamaica Bay were once home for the Idlewild GC. A few blocks in from the old Sunrise Highway, now part and parcel of the Belt Parkway, behind scattered rows of frame houses reachable along reed-framed rutted roadways, Idlewild's flags fluttered above tall stalks of swamp cattails. In this isolated setting, New York City had a fine example of a seaside links. A goodly share of hy-

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## CHECK YOUR VULNERABILITY

Here are some danger signs and some positive actions to consider.

● Know what is happening to land development in your immediate area. Farms subdivided for small housing complexes usually mean more of the same. Population spreads into your general area should trigger percentage increases in your "future" financial planning. Taxes will be rising along with assessed evaluations.

● Committee votes against levies for anticipated increases in labor, tax and operating costs, while possibly not an immediate threat, will accrue to the detriment of the course. Gradual rises in assessments and/or dues should keep pace with cost of living indicators. Larger demands for sorely needed revenue can hit a portion of the membership at a bad time, causing panic and possible defection.

● Stay as close as possible to local public works planning projects. Road and sewer improvements outside your property lines have a direct corollary to assessed value. Always have a strong representation, your most influential members, at public hearings on road construction. Condemnation of property comes rapidly on the heels of public hearings. Routing of seemingly important arteries is not only the province of road engineers. They tend to think along the lines of the old bromide—the short-

est distance between two points is a straight line. Cutting off the corner of your course as an expedient path for a roadway is too simple a solution, which you should be prepared to rebut with creative alternatives—assuredly not with anger.

● Watch the political arena carefully. Challenge candidates on their positions regarding open space legislation. Better yet, put up your own candidate. Green belt legislation, theoretical in nature, is the politician's panacea against all clear-minded protest over open land loss. Be wary in this arena.

● Continual examination of student registration versus available classroom space is a good barometer of possible expansionist thinking within the scholastic community. Support local schools in their search for expansion sites. Enlist the positive aid of your young people, who are potential students, influencers of academic thinking. Again, suggest viable alternatives.

● The innocent-looking shopping center nearing completion down the road may be the vanguard of more commercial businesses or small industry moving into your area. Who are the principals behind the operation? Have they looked you over without your knowing it? Get to know your new neighbors and determine if they are intent on acquiring large tracts of land for future development.

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draulic fill pumped in from Jamaica Bay buried this honorable layout as once again abandonment was necessary in the face of "progress." Land acquisition for the city's jetport, first called Idlewild, then International Airport and today John F. Kennedy, quickly swallowed yet another Queens golf institution.

The next course slated for demolition was North Hills, a private club in Douglaston near the Nassau County line. It boasted a history dating back beyond 1930. When North Hills ran afoul of the tax collector in 1962, real estate interests beamed at the opportunity of turning its incredible beauty into a setting for luxury housing. However, for once cooler heads prevailed. The city, incredibly, took it over, and Douglaston Park, as it is called now, was saved. Again, the academic world interfered with total preservation. A Catholic institution managed to secure some acreage at one end of the layout, ostensibly to build a school, prior to the city takeover. The fairways, lost to the city, were fallow for some time, when in fact they could have been in play on a lease basis until such time as the church group had formulated its building plan. A splendid old course had to be shortened by 1,000 yards, shrinking the back nine down to a mere 2,433 yards and a par of 32.

The changing landscape of Queens, where vast areas of open acreage once proudly housed numerous courses, is now accented by only six city-owned golfing facilities. Clearview, Douglaston, Kissena Park and Forest Park, all 18-hole courses, a par three in Flushing Meadow Park and a pitch and putt course in Jacob Riis Park. Clearview and Douglaston are completely boxed in, but there is room for another nine holes at Kissena, and an extensive wooded area of Forest Park would make an excellent setting for a separate 18. With an apathetic parks department, it is doubtful that any expansion will be undertaken, even though golf revenues could easily support any such "bold" endeavor.

The last remaining private club in Queens, Glen Oaks, which straddled the New York City-Nassau County line, is currently under development as the site of a high-rise apartment complex. Three 32-story luxury apartment towers are nearing completion on two acres on the 126-acre course. New

York's Planning Commission voted unanimously in August, 1971, to grant the owner a special permit to proceed with construction plans. The only condition of approval was a covenant guaranteeing that part of the 106-acres in New York City remain as open space. The developer plans to install an 18-hole course for the exclusive use of the project residents. Vigorous efforts by residents of Glen Oaks to urge the city to acquire the property for use as a city course have failed. The planning commission totally disregarded their recommendations. Community Planning Board 13 had complained that the three apartment towers would destroy the suburban character of the neighborhood so richly endowed by the presence of the Glen Oaks CC.

New York City, as a home for private clubs, seems an improbable reality. Forty-five years ago, there were 26 private and semi-private courses within its boundaries. Today, there is one.

The distinction of being the lone survivor in a long history of New York City golf belongs to the Richmond CC on Staten Island. How long this bastion of privacy can resist the burgeoning population of the city's newest real estate developers' playground, remains to be seen. Faced with horrendous tax burdens amounting to over \$200,000 a year, Richmond County will be hard pressed not to surrender its prime territory to some developer's enticing dollars. There is no immediate threat of bisection by a parkway. Membership support stubbornly resists encroachment. Tough management maintains a firm barrier against intrusion by the outside world. Be that as it may, Richmond County is vulnerable. Envious eyes view Todt Hill, the highest point above sea level on the Eastern Seaboard, along whose slopes Richmond County clings, as one of the prime regions for housing in the entire metropolitan area. If Richmond County fails, let us all hope the city also has been looking enviously at this superb display of superior golf course design with an eye toward preservation for all the city's golfing fraternity.

Heavily-populated New York suburbs, such as Westchester and Nassau Counties, also bear the scars of golf course property loss. In 1932, for example, Westchester housed 64 private courses and Nassau had 53. Today, there are only 35 in Westchester and

32 in Nassau, a loss of 50 courses in only two suburban counties.

Although much of the foregoing deals with the problems inherent in big city golf, lessons learned from the demise of the city's private and semi-private clubs can be applied to any community. All too often public forces combined with special interest groups have worked, secretly at times, to circumvent the interests of the golfing fraternity or the self-absorbed member, concerned only with his own starting time and his dollar Nassau.

Rural areas have not been immune to the forces conspiring, however innocently, to the eventual destruction of golf courses. The National Biscuit Company is currently installing its world headquarters on the site of the former Valley View GC in Hanover, Morris County, N.J. Concurrent with the purchase of Valley View by Nabisco, Morris County began construction of a new 18-hole course seven miles north of Hanover.

A Morris County park commission spokesman said recently, "Of course we knew Valley View was for sale. So were several others, but an approximate \$3 million asking price was out of reach. A 1971 referendum gave us the right to build another county course to supplement Flanders Valley, and we are now completing Sunset Valley on 144 acres in the Pequannock area."

According to Glen Craig, a Nabisco public relations communications spokesman, the company's action in acquiring Valley View were strictly business. He said recently, "We ended a two-year search covering at least 20 sites in Westchester and New Jersey when we settled on Valley View. We have been criticized by golfers for taking over the course, but we bought it because it was for sale. It's an ideal setting for our needs."

Valley View had given North Jersey's unaffiliated golfers a fine home for many years. The course was expertly maintained and efficiently operated. Judging by the amount of play, especially on weekends and during the summer, at the green fees charged, it must have been financially successful, too. Perhaps Valley View's vulnerability was in finding Nabisco's offer too enticing to resist.

Retention of Lake Hopatcong GC, a New Jersey landmark of some historical significance, might have become a

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reality had local officials been willing to consider tax relief under a plan offered by the course stockholders. Faced with an annual \$9,000 township tax and losses running to \$7,000 a year, the club was offered to the town, if it would operate the course as a public recreation facility for 10 years. The township refused, and the stockholders were forced to sell to real estate interests two years ago.

Lake Hopatcong was incorporated in 1901, and was practically hand built by the original membership. Construction methods that created unique features seldom seen today, such as rock piling in huge "mole" tracks that completely traversed several fairways, made Lake Hopatcong historically important. Scooping and piling operations created bunkers in the course's terraced hillsides, which nestled close to postage-stamp greens, usually square or oblong in shape. Water for sprinkling was fed through sunken pipes by gravity from a concrete holding tank set between two narrow fairways along the course's highest ridge. To play Lake Hopatcong was to step back in time, a nostalgic trip now forever denied metropolitan area golfers.

The bleak prospects faced by private clubs and commercial layouts because of official apathy and unimaginative local governments, scholastic expansion, development greed and industrial takeover, might seem insurmountable. They are, if course operators and memberships allow them to be. Not all city governments are unconcerned about the welfare of golfers, as has been seen in the forward-thinking philosophies expressed in action by Cincinnati and other communities (see *GOLFDOM*, June, p. 20). Scholastic expansion is a manageable monster. Acceptable alternatives for campus acquisitions usually can be found in most localities. Tax rolls are accented in red ink. In many instances, desirable locations other than golf courses are heavily tax troubled and open to financial offerings. Taking advantage of golf's vulnerability comes easiest to real estate developers and corporate entities. Resistance to generous offers, which are possible through long-range projections of potential income, is not a simple matter. Reprieve from total collapse is possible by offering a threatened facility to the local or county government in exchange for an

operating lease covering a specified length of time during which a site committee may shop around for alternative acreage.

It is not the intention of golf clubs to operate in anticipation of making profit. But recognizing that the threats come mainly from those concerned with profits should help to formulate a united front against incursion. Businesslike approaches are the reality clubs must embrace, if they are to survive the onslaught against their vulnerability.

Financial stability is the surest safeguard against the tax collectors axe. It is the best weapon against sudden riches dangled by real estate and industrial promoters. Scholastic and church groups can be handled in committee and through an extension of cooperation toward solving their space needs. The envious eyes glowing over the prospects of acquiring your property must be turned in other directions.

Politics, often the nemesis of the golfing community, should be used to advantage. City councils are elected. Why not a golfer or two as candidates? Cincinnati, whose highly successful public golf program has been held up as a model for some time, has the sympathetic ear of several council members who are golfers. Tommy Lo Presti, grossing nearly \$400,000 a year as professional and manager at Sacramento, California's Haggin Oaks Municipal and an outspoken proponent of public golf, once said, "We've been very fortunate in Sacramento. It

seems we always have a golfer on the city council. Usually, he's in there pitching for the golf group. If other communities would try to put a golfer on their councils, I don't think it would hurt golf one bit."

Single instances of commuting the death sentence of a failing course give encouragement to the hope that total demise is not necessarily the only fate left to a club that has fallen on difficult times. Recently, Montgomery County, Pa., responded to an appeal from the Jeffersonville GC near Norristown for financial aid. A special bond issue was approved to defray the purchase price, and the course was taken over by the county as a public facility.

In addition the city's acquisition of Douglaston Park, the city also picked up South Shore on Staten Island, which was failing as a commercial course. With all the criticism leveled at the city's parks department, one can only applaud when positive actions are taken.

Waiting for help from official quarters, however, is not meeting the problem head on. Total awareness of the threats leading to possible acquisition of your course should trigger an examination of your potential vulnerability.

A gaping hole in your chain link fence would be immediately repaired upon discovery. It would be necessary to forestall unwanted potential vandals. The same principle should apply in thwarting your course's potential extinction through acquisition. □



*During construction of Lake Hopatcong course, rocks were piled to form hazards, thus creating a distinctive feature not found elsewhere.*