

CONDOMINIUMS, PAR 61, AND PROFIT

By Joe Much, National Golf Foundation Pacific Northwest Consultant

Every year in the United States, dozens of golf courses change hands and a few are simply forced out of business.

Sometimes these are private clubs that have found it economically practical to dispose of property surrounded through the years by urban or suburban sprawl. Fortunately for the game and the 15 million Americans who consider it their favorite recreation, most of these golf clubs are replaced, usually by bigger and better operations, further out of town and usually in more attractive surroundings of the rural, "low rent" district.

But most of them are daily fee golf courses whose owners have wearied of the continuing battle of mounting taxes and operating costs, the long hours involved and the necessity of continually raising fees to make ends meet while facing the criticism of customers because of it.

Frequently the increasing value of the golf course property for other usage reaches the point at which the daily fee operator actually is losing money by staying in the golf business.

That is, his land appreciates to the point where it is worth more per acre than he can realize in profit margin at his golf course. Occasionally, a city or town faced with the loss of recreational facilities and open space through the sale of a golf course for other usage will make the purchase itself and operate the course on a municipal basis. Spared the burden taxation and backed by the resources of the municipality, the course survives and often flourishes

as never before if properly administered.

Sitll, courses are lost in almost every section of the nation each year when real estate developers and land speculators turn out to be the most attractive market for a beleaguered daily fee golf course owner.

Every year, scores of daily fee operators face the decision to hang on or sell. Because of their abiding affinity for the game, their investment of time and money in golf and often a feeling of responsibility to the golfing public, the vast majority of them elect to remain in business at the same old stand.

In burgeoning Eugene, Ore., one farsighted daily fee course owner found a way to have his cake and eat it too — retain his golf course while capitalizing on land values.

Robert Hope owns Oakway Golf Course, which, until the spring of 1973 was an 18-hole regulation course — 6,135 yards long, par 72.

His complex also included a golf shop with a lunch area, a driving range with a number of covered stations, a small office building for a teaching professional and an adequate, paved parking lot. The golf complex covered about 125 acres of a total 17-acre area owned by Hope.

As Hope described it, Oakway was an "ordinary" golf course, opened in 1945 after being built without professional design or construction expertise. While the terrain was excellent, the course offered little in the way of an unusual challenge for accomplished golfers, particularly when compared to the intriguing Eugene Country Club layout, which shared a common boundary.

Situated just outside the city limits, Oakway for years was the

only 18-hole regulation golf course open to the public within 10 miles of downtown Eugene. Because the city grew from 35,000 population in 1950 to 85,000 in 1970 and the metropolitan area had an even more dramatic growth, Oakway enjoyed an excellent market.

"We were making a reasonable profit," Hope said, "but we realized there would be a limit both to the volume of play we could accommodate and the price we could charge for golf in this area."

The course was also reaching an age when extensive remodeling would soon be necessary in order to keep it playable. Remodeling golf courses is an expensive proposition, especially when the job includes replacement or irrigation facilities.

In the middle 60s, a second private golf club, Shadow Hills, was built near Eugene and another 18-hole daily fee course, Emerald Valley, was opened at Cresswell, just south of the city. But it was not competition that brought Hope to his decision. Neither was it taxation, although this was threatening to become a factor when the Oakway area was annexed to the city in the early 70s.

Largely because of back-to-back golf courses, along with a natural growth pattern to the north of the city, the general Oakway area became prime prospective residential property.

"There comes a time," Hope explained, "when you are foolish to keep your property as a golf course. There comes a time when every day it is a golf course you are losing money. The land is simply too valuable."

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Like others whose life had been largely occupied with golf course proprietorship, Hope was reluctant to turn his back on the game entirely.

Instead, he decided to shrink his golf course. Shrink it and upgrade its quality in every respect, while making a large portion of his land available for residential development.

"I wanted the right package for everyone involved," he said.

That included his existing neighbors who had built homes along the borders of the original course and his neighbors-to-be who would someday occupy the valuable land he would release for development.

"People don't realize how beneficial a golf course can be merely in cleansing the air," he said. "I wanted to maintain the environmental aspect of the area and I wanted to remain an area the city would be proud of."

Hope was cognizant of the fact Oakway was the only golf course open to the public in this thickly settled residential section of Eugene.

With that in mind, he retained John Zoller, golf course superintendent at Eugene Country Club and part-time golf course architect, to reduce Oakway to an 18-hole intermediate, or executive, golf course.

Zoller's background included supervision of the recent remodeling of his own club by the highly regarded Robert Trent Jones organization, and the design of several nine-hole courses in Oregon. He had long been recognized as one of the Northwest's most authoritative turf-grass managers as well as one of its leading amateur golfers. Zoller recently accepted the superintendent's post at Monterey Peninsula Club in California.

The remodeling was to become, in fact, a complete replacement of the existing golf facility. Design and construction necessitated 18 new tees and 19 new greens, including the practice putting surface. It also included moving 83 sizeable trees and the addition of 42 sand bunkers where none had existed before.

Zoller was faced with a number of restrictions. Foremost was that imposed by the project manager of the real estate development which

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would be created by the shrinking of the course. The golf layout had to utilize the space designated by developers without variations.

Hope also stipulated the course be constructed to insure easy machine maintenance and that it should be a "fun course," attractive to beginners, women and the average player.

"Most of all," he said, "we wanted quality in everything we did. We felt we owed that to the players who had been with us for years and to the people who would in time occupy the real estate."

The executive course is a golf concept of the '60s in which a mixture of par-3 and par-4 holes are designed to provide golfers with a wide range of shots while eliminating the long fairway expanses of par-5 holes. The average executive course is about 4,000 yards with a par of 60 to 64.

Increasingly popular with real es-

tate developers, executive courses are scattered all over California and the East Coast. While they are relatively new to the Northwest, the Portland area claims two of the finest anywhere — Charbonneau, near Wilsonville, and Summerfield, near Tigard. They were both designed by golf course architect Ted Robinson of California.

At Oakway, it was also determined the driving range would be eliminated. Hope maintained that, to be profitable, a driving range should be lighted, and he was not prepared to impose this possible nuisance upon residents of the area. Furthermore, driving range land was earmarked for development into multiple family dwellings.

For zoning purposes, the Oakway project became a planned unit development, which meant that 40 percent had to be green belt and 60 percent development. The new golf course design required just 70 acres, leaving 100 acres available for residential development.

Of this, most will be used for apartments and condominiums. There are, however, 44 single unit lots along the fairways with purchase prices ranging from \$10,500 to \$16,000.

The new Oakway golf course is 3,529 yards, par 61. Its par-3 holes range from 104 to 170 yards and its par-4 holes from 245 to 333 yards. The course is rated at par from its back tees, a tribute to the skill factors designed into the course.

Equipped with a fully automatic irrigation system and a new metal maintenance building to house more sophisticated machinery, the remodeled golf course cost approximately \$300,000.

Hope feels it would be impossible to duplicate the job today at the same figure. Everything fell into place at the right time for the conversion of his course, he said.

Ground was broken May 1, 1973 and most of the work was done during one of the driest springs in Oregon history. By fall, all work was



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done and the new course seeded, all equipment and supplies having been delivered before the energy crisis added impetus to the nation's inflation spiral and shortages complicated golf course construction.

There followed an early rain season and mild winter in the Northwest, just what the golf course superintendent ordered. In fact, there was almost too much of a good thing. The course was opened exactly one year after ground breaking, one month past target. However, one of the wettest springs on record earlier this year made it advisable to delay traffic on the new turf.

Because the timing was so perfect, Hope is convinced his total cost was considerably less than it would be today, perhaps as much as 50 percent.

During the year Oakway was closed to play, Hope remodeled the interior of his clubhouse complex, which is particularly appealing to golfers. An antique collector, he decided to put some of his treasures to work in the shop, creating a unique and surprisingly functional decor.

Old five-gallon milk cans, attractively painted, serve as display bins for utility golf clubs; crest golf caps are attractively shown overflowing from an ancient trunk; an old cash register, highly polished and with an open drawer, holds scorecards, pencils, tees and ball markers; a huge dining table is used for the golf shoe display; clothing is arranged over various other antique pieces and such startlingly different items as bear traps, horse collars and muskets add to wall decor.

The entire shop is carpeted, including the dining area. There is no snack bar, but a battery of vending machines dispenses sandwiches, sweets and beverages. The dining area walls are covered with frame and well-arranged 8 x 10 photographs of golfers who have called Oakway home down through the years.

Hope's insistence upon quality follows through golf shop merchandise to the well-landscaped exterior of the clubhouse. A breezeway connects the shop and his office with the small building housing the offices of the project manager and his staff.

Hope envisions a larger mainte-

nance budget for the new course, but explains that his regulation course had been worked under an exceptionally low-cost operation. With the addition of automatic irrigation, riding greens mowers and other sophisticated machinery, quality is also stressed in maintenance.

Public acceptance of the course was good immediately after opening, but there has been some change in clientele. Those who prefer the challenges of a full-length course have moved, but shop personnel reports much more play by women, couples and families.

Nor is Hope willing to surrender his old regular customers without a struggle.

"We made a test with one golfer," he said. "We had him play here three times in one week, then go out to a regulation course. He shot the best round of his career."

The idea is that the short game accuracy demanded by the new Oakway will sharpen any player's game for any golf course.

"They could play here three rounds to one on a regulation course," Hope said, "and generally improve their golf."

When fully developed, released acreage around the golf course will provide 1,265 living units. Hope expects at least 40 percent of the residents to be golfers and hopes to convert others. Whether or not the Oakway executive becomes their home course, it will always be their course at home. He expects to continue operating the course on a daily fee basis and to resist any pressure to close it to resident play only.

Eugene lost a sorely needed 18-hole regulation golf course in the shrinkage of Oakway, but it did not lose an important green belt and recreation facility. It gained its first intermediate golf course and a new, high-density residential area near the city center.

Even before the remodeling of Oakway was under construction, the city of Eugene and Lane County were exploring possibilities of developing municipal golf facilities to meet a growing demand. In the long run, the Oakway project probably will have done a greater service to golf in the Eugene metropolitan area than anyone expected, particularly if it hastens the development of new regulation facilities.

DESIGN

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drawings. Placement of trees in the rough or on fairways has a great effect on maintenance cost. If trees in the rough are allowed to stand too close together, certain equipment cannot negotiate these areas. Significant labor savings can be gained through the use of machines, thus the location of trees becomes vitally important if these areas have to be cut by hand.

A good golf superintendent will be able to specify varieties of grasses which are best-suited for that particular area's requirements of climate, temperature, humidity, and rainfall. To be sure, the initial cost may be greater. But when considered against the possibility of having to remove existing grass and go back and replant other sections, the initial cost becomes insignificant.

A superintendent can be very valuable in determining the amount and types of equipment which will be needed to maintain a golf course. Many clubs and owners follow a standard shopping list, and by the time a superintendent is put on the job, thousands of dollars have been applied to equipment which might otherwise have been spent to better advantage, or perhaps saved.

A superintendent can be useful in planning and layout of the maintenance building. With hundreds of thousands of dollars of equipment involved, a well laid out maintenance building is a prime requisite for any course. This function is sometimes relegated to a nearby barn or other such structure.

To sum up, a qualified superintendent can not only insure the owner full value for his investment while a course is being built; he can insure that the maintenance cost for the life of the course can be minimized by correcting those things during construction which will materially affect the maintenance of the course in future years.

This does not downgrade the importance of the sound architect and course builder. Rather it points out the long-term value of the course superintendent's input.

Certainly architects and builders have reputations to protect; but in the final analysis it is the superintendent and the members who live with the course.