

Water, redesign, spectators and weather are aces in an Arizona tournament gamble

When it comes to taking calculated risks, Bill Nanini has to rank right up there with the best of them. Two years ago, he bet the reputation of his prestigious Tucson National Golf Club and Estates, not to mention half a million dollars, on an extensive facelift. One hundred thousand cubic yards of dirt on 10 of the 18 existing holes had to be moved, 103 acres of automatic irrigation installed and everything from tees to traps redesigned and put back together in just 171 days. At stake was Tucson National's 14-year hold on the PGA's Joe Garagiola Tucson Open tournament.

From outward appearances, Nanini lost the bet. On an inspection visit three months before the pros were to arrive in February, a PGA survey team termed the revamped course unsuitable. Despite all arguments to the contrary, the 1979 tournament was staged in town at Tucson's Randolph North Municipal Golf Course.

This year, in the midst of an unseasonable monsoon, the Open returned to Tucson National, but for the last time, as it turned out.

While Nanini technically has one more year on his contract with the Tucson Conquistadores, the tournament's sponsoring organization, he recently voluntarily cancelled the agreement so the Open could be played at Randolph in the future—closer to the heart of town, and thus more likely to draw the larger spectator galleries in this era of gas-consciousness that will generate the revenues necessary to support the Tucson charities which depend on the event.

"We've enjoyed the national publicity and television exposure," Nanini concedes readily. "It's been good for us in that respect. But we have members who are upset because they can't use their own golf course the week during the tour-

namment—they don't like the crowds, and they live here."

While it may be fun to have the game's best as guests on your course, Nanini envisions Tucson National as more of a golf-oriented community than an orthodox country club. The PGA is in town for just a week. The rest of the year, there are homes being built and sold, golf schools drawing students from around the world, and executive conferences above and beyond the demands of a growing membership.

Nor is the PGA sacrosanct. Given his choice, Nanini claims he would like nothing better than to host the U.S. Open. For that, he knows he will need a tough, challenging course. For that, Nanini set about changing the face of Tucson National.

The USGA's U.S. Open connection is in all seriousness, and Nanini is doing everything in his power to prepare the course to meet that organization's exacting standards. And more than just a golf course is involved. According to Nanini, the USGA looks for a host city that can provide spectator galleries of some 25,000 per day. Tucson and Phoenix are fast-growing communities expected to have populations of 750,000 and 1.5 million respectively within the next few years.

The Tucson Open has attracted an average of more than 25,000 spectators, Nanini maintains, and adds that the city would be every bit as hospitable in June as such past U.S. Open sites as Washington, D.C., Atlanta and Tulsa.

To be sure, daytime temperatures in Arizona are high, but they are accompanied by virtually no humidity and an almost non-existent possibility of rain. Thus, not only could such a prestigious tournament be played with confidence in the cooperation of the elements, but it could be played in more comfortable conditions than



those of the hot, muggy South, since nighttime temperature drops of 30 to 40 degrees are common.

Nor has Nanini overlooked the other creature comfort criteria for holding a major event. Good hotel and motel accommodations are available within a few miles of National, and Nanini is upgrading the club's own facilities with an eye toward being able to accommodate as many as 250 players and officials right at the course.

USGA commitments are made five years in advance, he notes, predicting, confidently, "We will be ready within four years."

A hillside nine holes will go into play later this year, bringing the club's total to 27—allowing the front nine to be given extensive renovating under more placid conditions, while 18 holes remain in play. The modest tennis



complex is being expanded to 20 lighted courts.

Executive conference facilities and guest accommodations are being tripled. Under a recently signed five-year contract, Golf Digest will hold 10 to 12 schools a year at National, and the club will build a special golf schoolhouse, complete with videotape facilities and more extensive practice areas.

Perhaps most importantly, the Pima County Board of Supervisors has approved Nanini's plan to build an additional 1,260 units of housing on 456 acres of the club's open desert terrain, surrounding the 27 holes.

The Nanini family first came to Arizona in 1939, when his mother was advised to leave Chicago's blustery climate due to an asthma condition. His father, Sam Nanini, was a successful Midwestern road builder who

recognized the potential of the open and around what was then a sleepy village of 15,000 in the shadow of the Santa Catalina Mountains.

Today, Tucson is a vigorous city of half a million, and the family's holdings northwest of town have handsomely justified that earlier gamble.

Tucson National began with an 18-hole golf course on the banks of the Canada del Oro wash. Shortly after the course opened, the PGA relocated its Tour event, first staged in 1945, from a course in town to the Nanini enclave 11 miles out. Over the years, guest accommodations and housing were added: condominiums along the 7th, 8th, 9th, 11th, 13th and 14th fairways; custom-built single family homes on hillside sites overlooking the course. It all looked peaceful and prosperous, but Nanini, a self-

confessed perfectionist, was not satisfied.

The golf course was the centerpiece, and the golf course was not quite right. When the course was originally constructed in 1961, Nanini was splitting time between the family's Chicago-based road building business and the Tucson holdings, and the logistics of supervising construction in absentia resulted in a fundamental design oversight. On the original plans, the greens were too large for Nanini's tastes (at 65, he remains a low-handicap golfer, playing in seniors' tournaments in the U.S. and overseas) but when their size was reduced, the traps were not brought in accordingly. The golfer in Nanini could never be content with that.

Even more vexing was the problem of watering the elongated, 260-acre course. In Arizona, nothing is more

precious than water, and Tucson National's outdated manual irrigation system required as many as three water crewmen 24 hours a day, seven days a week during summer months to do an unabashedly inadequate job. If the golfer in him was aggravated by trap placement and green elevations, the businessman in Nanini was even less able to tolerate the water situation. The two concerns combined to spark the momentous decision to tear out the entire back nine and install an automatic irrigation system.

"It's very difficult to convey what we did," says Greg Graham, course superintendent, "especially to people who do not understand the climatic processes at work here. You don't take something that's been 16 years growing, rip it up as badly as we ripped it up, and get it back into playing condition this quickly without a tremendous amount of work and care.

With the kind of grass we have, it's unreal how quickly we have come back." (Fairways at Tucson National are 419 Tiffway Bermuda, with Penncross Bent greens.)

Water was an important consideration in hiring Graham in 1977, acknowledges Nanini. Something very obviously had to be done, and Graham had extensive background in irrigation systems, including close working relationships with The Toro Company. Graham estimates more than a thousand hours went into designing a system for just the back nine, an exacting process ranging from aerial photographs to days of discussion with Tom Gilchrist of the Norton Corporation, the Phoenix-based Toro distributor company that provided the equipment and expertise.

"Irrigation is the thing here in Arizona," Graham emphasizes. "Without it, you don't have anything. And it's got to be 100 percent, or you don't have anything either. We had to have better control of what we watered and we had to eliminate the waste in time and efficiency."

On May 8, 1978, the Cats descended on the fairways and greens, and the race with time was on. During the reconstruction, there were occasional light moments—finding utility mains even the local gas company didn't know about, or playing mumblety-peg with NBC's television cables—but mostly it was deadly serious work.

"We learned a lot from the back nine," says Graham, "and the No. 1 thing we learned was don't do something like this in the summer. The growing season is too short and the temperatures too hot—somehow, you have to water all the way through. I know I blew one or two main lines right out of the ground, because as fast as the guys had them in, I was right behind turning on the water. I needed it that badly."

Although trees were saved and special plantings left undisturbed wherever possible, the swiftness and completeness of the change was a major shock for both members and staff. Most tees were changed, fairway traps and bunkers were relocated, and greens were elevated and more clearly defined with close-in traps. Nanini knows he lost members in the turmoil, and the PGA's decision to move the 1979 Open to an adequate but uninspiring municipal course was a blow that still rankles. Nanini and Graham both insist unemotionally that the course was ready for play in ample time for the tournament. And, indeed, members were playing it the week of the tournament.

Nanini and Graham think the sponsors and the PGA acted too quickly, and on an imperfect understanding of what was being attempted, especially in terms of growing conditions in Arizona.

That, however, is past. The pros who came back to Tucson National last February pronounced the renovations largely successful, and their judgment merely echoes the ones which have been made daily by the club's staff. Water savings are especially noticeable. The front nine is still on manual, but the back nine can be completely taken care of by one man in 12 hours. In addition, points out Gilchrist, the automated system (a computerized Toro Vari-Time II, which will be augmented with a Vari-Time III as the new nine comes into play this year) is so designed that even in the event of a catastrophic drought similar to California's traumatic experience in 1977, Graham could cut water usage more than 50 percent and still maintain a narrow corridor of grass from tees to greens. With an eye toward Arizona's increasingly tight water supply picture, the new equipment was installed complete with filters to handle effluent water,



should that become necessary.

Now the focus of attention is the hillside nine, designed by Bob von Hagge and Bruce Devlin, who also redrew the back nine. A protege of the late Dick Wilson, von Hagge has laid out the nine with an eye toward the starkly beautiful Arizona landscape. Stately saguaro cactus will stand sentry on the hillsides against the blunt shapes of the Santa Catalinas in the near distance.

"That new nine is going to be absolutely the prettiest you'll see in the Southwest," predicts Graham. "Von Hagge is an artist with soil—he can do



things with a D8 Cat you'd have difficulty doing with a pencil. You'll see something different at different times of the day. It's going to be some kind of beautiful."

The new nine was grassed in July and could be in play as early as January. After that, attention can be turned to bringing the older front nine up to snuff, a task which may not be completed until 1982. An additional advantage, beyond the desert views everyone hopes will be nothing short of spectacular, will be the ability to start players even on Tucson's rare frosty mornings. The current first

holes are near the Canada, the lowest point on the course and the area most likely to accumulate and retain frost. The hillside holes will be above the frost line in clear, early morning sun, allowing players to start from the higher ground and finish below when the frost clears.

Tucson National currently has 42 guest rooms ranging from deluxe bedrooms to self-contained casitas ("little houses") for conferences, golf schools and vacationers. Nanini plans to expand that number to 120, especially with Golf Digest committed to 8 or 10 schools a year, in addition to

schools run by Obitz & Farley and John Jacobs.

Executive groups from Boeing aircraft to Beatrice Foods have been frequent guests, finding the club's seclusion more conducive to relaxed business (Nanini's word for it is "workations") than such high distraction destinations as Las Vegas. Practice areas will also be enlarged, with dual driving ranges and putting, sand blasting and chipping areas designed to accommodate schools of 20 to 40 students without interfering with member practice areas.

"As I see it," Nanini offers, "this will be a golf course and tennis operation consisting of people who want to live in this environment and be associated with a high amenity golf and tennis facility. There are retired people out here, a great many of them, and they love golf. We are trying to create a golf course that is interesting for the higher handicap and older player, yet can be stretched into a challenge for the professional and lower handicap golfer."

With four sets of tees, the course can be adjusted from 5,800 yards for ladies to up to 7,500 yards. Most members play it at about 6,400 yards; the PGA at about 6,500. The USGA, Nanini adds, would probably play a U.S. Open at about 7,200 yards.

The club currently has 600 members, but only 275 are active golfing members, which is not quite enough, Nanini feels. The new facilities will comfortably handle as many as 1,500 members in various categories, most of them people who will live in the housing being created on the perimeter in orderly yearly increments of about 100 units.

"We want to make this the most beautiful and prestigious desert golf course in the Southwest," Nanini says, "and have the kind of quality course that will attract a U.S. Open in the next few years. That's my real ambition and desire. We have a large enough city to provide an audience. We are better, in June, than a lot of other places it has been played, in terms of weather. And we will have a truly challenging course, the kind of test USGA officials look for in picking a site."

When it comes to gambles, Nanini figures he's betting with a handful of aces. **GB**