

# The value of executive courses

## A wise use of available land

By William W. Amick, Golf Course Architect

Bill Amick is a golf course architect working out of Daytona Beach. In the past 20 years he has designed and remodeled more than 50 fine golf courses. A majority of these courses are in Florida and two are used annually for PGA Tour tournaments. Bill is a registered Florida Landscape Architect and a past president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects. Recently he gave presentations at the Florida Turf-Grass Association Conference in Tampa and the Florida Golf-week's Golf Course Management Seminar at Cypress Gardens.

### Why a golf course?

Golf has been growing as a recreational attraction in America since the late 19th century. More courses have created more golfers, who in turn have had more money and time for the game.

Though still competing with other sports and fads, golf will keep on growing in our society. Some reasons why:

- \* Golf is the game of a lifetime, for men and women, ages 9 to 90. Singles, couples, friends and families all can play. The market potential is almost unlimited.
- \* Playing golf is healthy, outdoor exercise, but not too strenuous — just what the doctor ordered.
- \* Each golf course environment is unique, unlike any other of 12,000 courses in the U.S. and 20,000 worldwide. No two holes are alike. There is always a new view and a new challenge.
- \* The challenge of competing against oneself, other players and nature at the same time has special drawing power. There is no such thing as a perfect game—but the fun is in trying.
- \* A golf course brings alive and preserves from 20 to 300 acres of

green open space. The clean environment is a joy for all, especially in an urban setting.

That is why about 1 of every 15 Americans play golf. That is why any place people live or visit—cities and towns, resorts and “new community” developments—is incomplete without one or more fine golf courses. Golf is a pleasure, and can be a successful investment.

### Choosing a concept

Until the 1970s golf courses were generally defined as one of two types, regulation and par-3. Now there is more.

The so-called regulation or full-length type usually covers 120-160 acres, stretches 6000 to more than 7000 yards, and for men plays to a par of 70 to 73 for 18 holes. Most 9-hole courses use 50 to 80 acres, play 3000-35000 yards, par 34-37.

The par-3 course has always had all or all but one short par-3 holes, laid out on 30 to 60 acres for 18 holes, as little as 10 acres for 9 holes. A good beginner's training ground, the par-3 is often boring to most golfers.

But in this decade a different golf course concept is taking over. The new answer where land is at premium, development costs are rising and more golfers want to play is the “challenge” — also called short, mid-length or executive — course.

The challenge type combines the best features of full-length and par-3 courses. It offers a mix of par-3 and par-4 holes, each unique, rarely a par-5. Accuracy is the prime requirement, strength is not. The lures are variety and beauty.

For an 18-hole challenge course the length may total 3500 to 5000 yards, par range 60 to 65, taking no more than 75

to 100 acres. For 9 holes, you could cut those in half.

The National Golf Foundation, trade association of the golf industry, reports that there are nearly 600 such courses in the U.S. Florida has the most 18-hole mid-length courses and is a close second to California in grand total. More than 75% are privately-owned, open to the public, profit motive facilities. Almost 20% of all new courses and 15% of course additions that opened in 1978 were this shorter type.

The trend is becoming stronger, and popular demand plus economics are the reasons.

### Using land wisely

Land in acreages large enough for golf is usually in short supply and/or expensive, at least near populated areas.

If a golf facility is needed, desired or important to the total land plan, we must try to make the best possible use of the space available. Thus the shorter, challenge type design is an excellent solution.

A shorter course, whether 9 or 18 holes, provides the most golf for the widest range of golfers, if properly designed. Normally we can save about one-third of the acres compared with a “championship” length course. That automatically builds in these advantages for an ownership:

- \* If more than one site is available, the choice is widened. A daily fee course investor, local government or residential community developer may be able to build closer to the population market or high traffic roads.
- \* Fewer long, wide fairways are needed on a challenge course. So a course can still fit on a rough, or odd-shaped site, if necessary.
- \* Total cost of the land will be less, all other factors being equal. In the case of a developer wanting homesites to sell, he can save money on golf course land while freeing more acres for housing.
- \* Fewer acres for golf means less to clear, grade and plant, and cover with an underground irrigation system. That means a construction budget savings of 20-25% alone.
- \* Less acres of golf course means a smaller operating budget in the future.

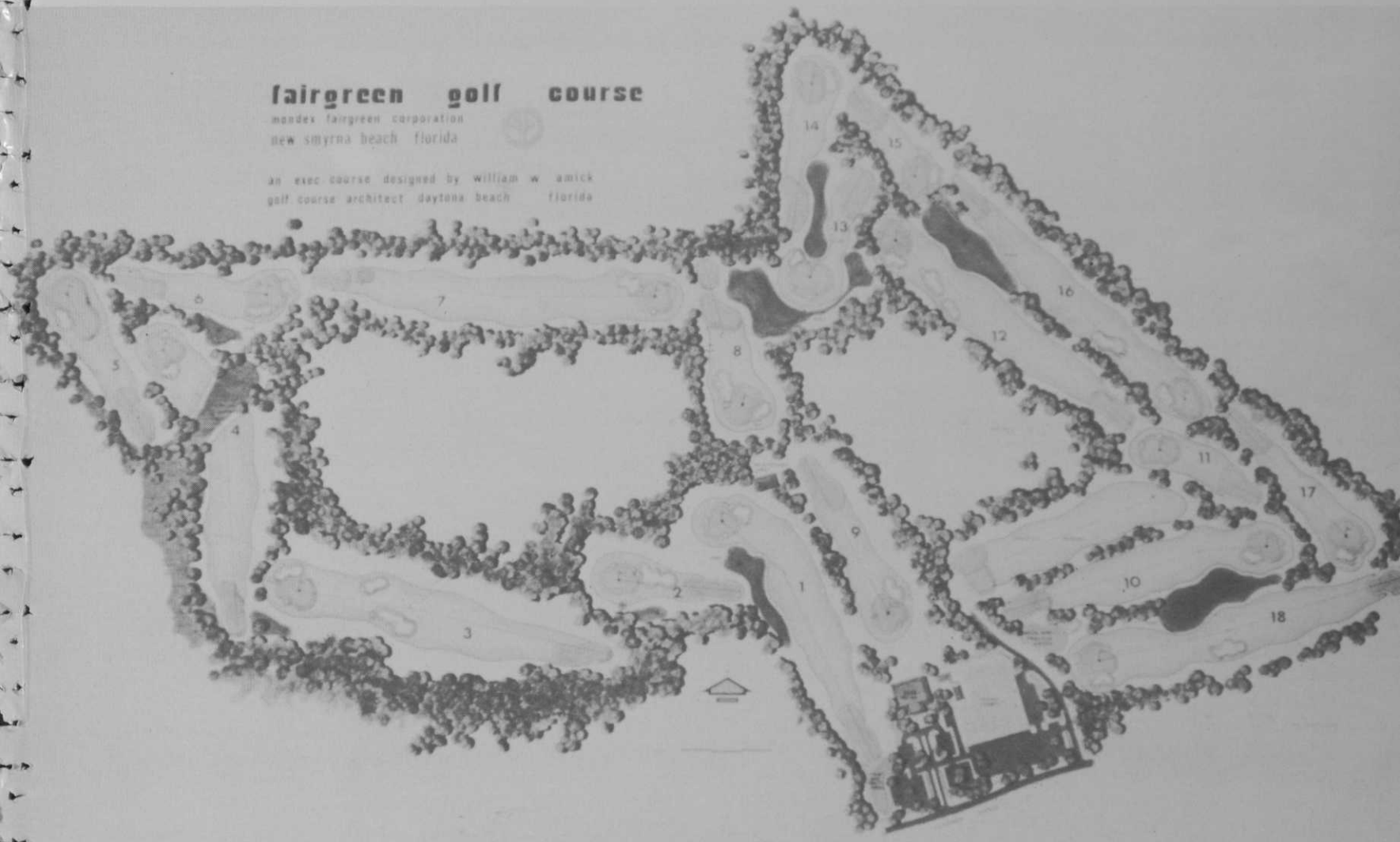


The layout of an executive course is impressive. The only difference is the fairways are shorter.

## fairgreen golf course

mondex fairgreen corporation  
new Smyrna beach florida

an exec course designed by william w amick  
golf course architect daytona beach florida



### Design for challenge

To attract and keep customers a golf course should meet many criteria. It must first be located in a market with a need, or create a demand by meeting or beating the competition.

Quality of maintenance is important. So is competent, public-relations-minded management. But thoughtful, creative design is what makes a golf course really special.

In design a fine golf course or golf hole should have:

- \* Eye Appeal - The esthetic values of harmony, proportion, balance, rhythm and emphasis, a thing of beauty, just like art, printing or photography.
- \* Shot Values - Be fair to play for golfers of all abilities and strength, sensible length vs. par, no blind shots from tee to landing zone and approach to green, and adequate safety space between holes.
- \* Easy Maintenance - The best grasses for the climate area. Playing areas easily mowed by riding machines. Golf car paths fit traffic flow and easily maintained. Irrigation system and water source are reliable. Drainage permits play even in wet weather.

Without such design, a golf course may not be a beauty but a beast—ugly, unpopular and a financial burden.

Golf is essentially a game of accuracy—controlling the ball. Moving it along for distance is necessary, but the art and challenge of shot-making is direction.

The challenge style of design focuses on direction by combining the most interesting values of the great golf courses. The goals are:

- \* To reduce overemphasis on power or distance that discourages many average players or potential players, and return a balanced requirement for accuracy.
  - \* To better test and challenge the long hitter without using excessive length or great amounts of land.
  - \* To provide within the total golf course, on all holes, interest, challenge, fairness and beauty for the 95% of golfers who are not powerful and/or par shooters.
- How does the challenge style of design succeed?
- \* By gradually tapering-in or narrowing tee-shot landing areas for long hitters on the par-4 and par-5 holes, leaving fairways normal width for average or short hitters.

- \* By also pinching in with hazards, trees and/or rough the second shot landing areas for long hitters on par-5s.

- \* By placing trouble close to or on one side of a green — sand, water, trees, steep slopes — leaving the opposite side of the green safe for the average golfer to come in.

On such a course the average golfer will easily stay short of trouble off the tee, and can shoot at an open, safe side of each green. Meanwhile the long-hitting, low-handicap player must aim to steer clear of hazards off the tee, or can play short, and go for the flag on the greens. Thus a golf course challenges everyone.

### Attracting the golfers

Short, challenge-type courses have built-in appeal to nearly all ability levels of golfers — when located, designed, built, maintained, operated and priced right.

The challenge course is the right answer when land space is tight, or there are enough full-length courses but no mid-length courses, or there is a large senior-age population or tourist market.

Par-72, long courses have been built in many cases because of tradition,

because that was always the "standard". But even from the short set of tees such courses can be difficult and discouraging, boring and tiring. When golf is work and takes 5 hours for 18 holes, many golfers play just 9 holes, or stop playing.

But the shorter, challenge course is different. In many markets it would still be unique. A well-designed mid-length course, whether 9 or 18 holes, either by itself or added to a longer course, appeals to most golfers.

Many golfers are "casual"—old and young, men and women, experienced or beginner. They do not have great skill, and few will ever have. But they want fun, fresh air, companionship and at least some success on the golf course.

A short course can delight but seldom overwhelm such golfers. They can have a bad day and still score okay (82 sounds good, even if 20 over par on a par-62 course). Juniors, seniors and women who do not hit the ball far but do hit straight can rely on their skill. Proper design will ask for many different shots using many different clubs.

Instead of taking 4-5 hours for 18 holes a round on a short course should normally take 3 hours (1½ for 9). Busy people love it. Some will then play more often, and/or take more time practicing, relaxing and buying in the clubhouse.

These features that save money and build income mean that, in most situations, membership or green fees can be kept lower than the competition. Volume will make up the difference in the long run.

#### Short course successes

Golfer acceptance and the trend toward shorter courses was supported in a 1976 National Golf Foundation survey of privately-owned mid-length/executive course owners. Every course had been built since 1965 and every owner was satisfied with the decision to build and operate a short course.

Some typical comments:

*"As the price of land continues to escalate, it is bound to become more popular . . ."* — Florida.

*"Maintenance expense much lower, overhead is much lower, return on investment is much better . . ."* — Michigan.

*"We have the course that will be enjoyed by more golfers than the longer ones, play in 3 hours or less, score good . . ."* — Ohio.

*"Players can start in evening and complete 18 holes, walk and carry bag, better for seniors and women . . ."* —

Pennsylvania.

*"We find that the golfers get success and have a better time because they score better. That's what it's all about . . ."* — Utah.

This survey showed that the average 18-hole short course covers 60 acres, plays to par 62, almost 4000 yards. For 9, averages are 40 acres, par 31, 2000 yards. Median investment in these courses was just \$200,000. Every owner said he was making a profit. The typical market area had a population of 100,000 within 10 miles of the course.

One example of a successful mid-length course is Fairgreen Golf Course, New Smyrna Beach (near Daytona Beach), Florida.

The facility is owned and operated by private enterprise, Mondex Fairgreen, Inc. It is open to the public and located within a residential development, owned separately.

Course design was by Bill Amick. Construction began in early 1977, the course opened in early 1978, and hosted 26,000 rounds the first year of operation.

Fairgreen GC covers 95 acres and is easy to walk. Playing time averages about 3 hours for 18 holes. The 18 has 8 par-4 holes, 10 par-3 holes, each different. Par is 62, 4130 yards from men's tees, 3619 yards for women. The "challenge" concept of design uses sand bunkers, trees, water and mounds throughout.

The 18th hole is a good example. For men it plays 352 yards. A lake gradually moves into the right side of the fairway in the long-drive landing zone. On the left, 240 to 270 yards off the tee, is a fairway bunker (sand trap).

The course was cleared out of pine and palm woods. Water hazards were created by excavation and were the source of fill to contour the flat ground. Construction cost was \$475,000, a savings of at least \$175,000 if the course had been "championship" size.

#### Saving construction \$

Like everything else, construction costs for golf courses have increased in recent years. Quality is important for a golf course to build business.

Yet more than any other factor, size of golf course dictates cost. Developing a mid-length, challenge-type course enables ownership to save big money up front.

It's true that high-quality greens and tees are costly to build anywhere. Any fine golf course needs 10 or 19 each, the best that can be built. But a shorter course that emphasizes accuracy calls for smaller greens, up to 20% smaller

than we see on "big" courses. At \$1.50 per square foot, building smaller greens is a big savings.

On shorter holes fairways are neither as long, nor need they be as wide on a challenge course. Fewer acres means major savings when there is less to clear, fill, contour, prepare, plant, fertilize and irrigate. In warm climates especially, savings in less irrigation system can run to \$2000 per acre.

Each site and design concept is different, and would have a different budget. But there is no doubt that you can get an outstanding golf course for far less money with a mid-length, challenge design.

#### Saving operations \$

With a shorter challenge-type course, fewer acres of ground and smaller greens should allow economy in maintenance.

The typical course maintenance budget for a full-size facility can run \$100,000 to \$200,000 per year. Using the same standards, a short course can be maintained for perhaps 75% or less of those totals.

Any course needs a competent superintendent, major pieces of equipment and certain supplies. Beyond those, the savings add up.

The ratio of fairway acres between a short and long course might be 50-60%. There should be that much saving in mowing labor, fuel, fertilizer, chemicals and their application time. The same is true for irrigation water and/or pumping costs.

Or, for about the same budget as a longer course, ownership may choose to do a better job with more intense maintenance. A better-groomed course quickly gets a reputation for quality, the best of all advertising.

Either way, maintenance economy is a big plus for the mid-length course.

Another savings comes from lower property taxes. For every acre saved in design, there is a net return year after year in less property taxes. Multiply the average assessment per acre for golf courses or nearby open space land to figure the difference.

A wise decision on site selection and type of course in the early planning stage means many dollars gained or lost in all the golf seasons to come.

#### Downsizing for the future

Every advantage in originally designing and building a shorter, challenge-type course also apply to remodeling or shortening an older, full-length course.

The crush of suburbia or industry encircling an older course may make

*Continues on page 29*

**Executive** from page 18

land too valuable to keep only for golf. An owner may decide he would be better off to shorten his golf course and sell the freed land for development. Sometimes a private club may sell its old physical plant to a city or private enterprise, and move further into the country. Zoning may dictate that at least part of the land be saved for golf or open space.

Highway extension or condemnation has chewed off sections of many courses in modern times. Attempts to squeeze a course tighter but keep the same playing length have too often resulted in freak holes or unsafe routings.

Redesign of an older, spread-out course might permit sale of one third or more of the ground, yet allow the same number of holes. If loss of space is significant, the answer may be to have a golf course architect make a new routing, with interesting and safe holes, and a more playable "challenge" length.

**Golf architect services**

A qualified golf course architect is essential in packaging a successful golf course plan.

Golf course architecture is a specialized profession combining

knowledge of design, landscape architecture, civil engineering, hydraulics, soil science, turf management, golf playing values and marketing.

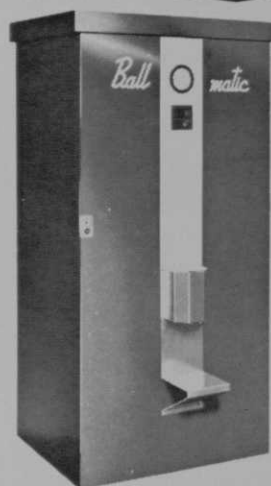
A qualified golf course architect can provide valuable advice from the earliest stages of planning: site selection, course routing, land planning concepts if the course is part of a larger development, financing, development timetable and construction.

His experience and training help assure the efficient management of a construction budget. He will interpret the concepts desired by ownership onto paper, and see that they become reality on the ground. He can and should personally inspect important stages of construction to minimize errors and control costs.

A qualified golf course architect has many years of successful experience in design and construction of courses. He can offer the recommendation of many past clients. He is a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects.

Planning, building and putting into operation a successful golf course is an expensive, complex process. A qualified golf architect is an expert in making it work.

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