

Designer's forum

By Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan

The golf course contractor an unsung hero

There is a tendency for people to attempt to isolate the one person who seems the most responsible for something of note. Perhaps it is because we wish to have a solitary figure to focus on, for admittedly, it is much easier to praise a general than all the men of his army, a conductor instead of the orchestra, or the quarterback instead of the team. Although we know better, we sometimes forget that the person being singled out is tall only because he stands on the shoulders of people who helped him achieve his distinction. The world is filled with such unacknowledged people, whether it be the families who make personal sacrifices to permit our hero or heroine to rise, or it is the friends, associates, or subordinates who directly assist the effort. Similarly, in the field of golf course development, there is a tendency to focus on the architect instead of the unsung hero, namely the Golf Course Contractor.

In fact I believe that the term "contractor" or "builder" does not do these men justice, for they are artisans in the strictest sense. Their tools may be bulldozers, earthmovers, and tractors but their medium is the earth and the best of these craftsman can mold the landscape to produce earthsculptures of tees, greens, mounds and sandtraps. They understand the subtleties of nature, landforms and natural processes, and strive to blend the necessary artificiality of golf features imperceptibly into the surrounding environment. In addition these men know that fine turf must be grown and maintained on the soils and slopes that they leave, so much attention is given to agronomic matters such as the texture of the topsoil, drainage, seedbeds, fertilizers and seed or stolons. They work against unpredictable weather, unforeseen geological features, and competing weeds and animals to meet an unforgiving ideal planting time. Besides their natural opponents, there are delays caused by humans such as unresponsive suppliers, vandalism, or strikes by other trades or unions. Their equipment and crews are specialized for only golf course construction and thus can achieve a naturalness of contours that is uncharacteristic of road and/or sewer contractors. But the convention is to call these men contractors, and so I shall, but in your mind there should be a clear distinction between contractors and Golf Course Contractors.

Having established what they are, we should examine *who* they are and what they *do* to earn the title of hero. There are not many firms in the world who do only golf course construction. One reason is because the scope of the work is so varied and so complex that few companies can organize, equip and train themselves to handle the work. Not only must the Golf Course Contractor comply with all of the legalities attendant construction, but he must do clearing, grubbing, drainage, earthmoving, tile, amend soils for greens, irrigation, seedbed preparation, planting, mulching, watering, early establishment, erosion repair, sandtraps, tree planting, and sometimes, complete golf course maintenance.

Because there are fewer courses being built now than ten years ago, the competition during bidding can be fierce, thus requiring small profit margins. Once selected as the successful bidder, the contractor must execute all of this work in a tight time frame, hoping that delays and forced overtime wages will not eat up all of this profit. Most "contractors" find such bidding and working conditions intolerable and thus they do not enter golf course construction or they last a very short time. Further, since golf course projects are so scattered it means that these men must be apart from their families for long periods or they must develop an almost nomadic family experience.

The obvious question then, is why do they persist in golf course construction? The answer is because these people are artisans who find reward and take pride in the work they do. To remain in this business and to produce high quality golf courses requires that a Golf Course Contractor put a bit of himself into every roll, every mound, every green, every feature. He is creating as he constructs and he feels good about each days work. But if golf course construction is so creative then what is the function of the Golf Course Architect? He plans at a micro-scale and is concerned, while designing, about 150 or 200 acres, or more at a contour interval of perhaps one or two feet. The architect must plan the relationship or elements on a site that may be covered with jungle, below water level, or has problems not clearly discernible.

The Golf Course Contractor, on the other hand, works at the micro-scale of perhaps 1/4 of an acre at a time and contour changes of inches on a site

that is completely cleared. The Golf Course Architect may draw detailed features at a scale of 1" = 10 feet, but it is the contractor who must build that feature at 1" = 1". No matter how sophisticated the plans may be drawn there must always be field interpretation of those drawings; and it is this ability to field interpret that separates the great contractors from the others. This ability is learned from technical training, repeated experiences, and years of honest constructive criticism. But it is not born solely of intellect for the great contractor has a superb imagination, reliable intuition, and good eye-to-hand coordination. It is my personal feeling that any dummy can be taught to run a bulldozer but only a precious few can develop the skill to grade a green.

I don't believe that any Golf Course Architect would disagree with me when I say that a great contractor can make your work look outstandingly good, and a poor contractor can butcher the greatest design in the world. In fact, there are some Golf Course Contractors who have taken bad golf course plans, and made enough field adjustments to fashion a good golf course, only to have the designer get all of the credit.

These are hard times for Golf Course Contractors for fewer courses are being built, and inflation, interest rates and rising wages make it difficult to make a profit. This may be good for it will force those shady types to leave the field but in the meantime it does work hardships on the good contractors. This is not just a personal problem for it affects every golfer who appreciates a fine golf course. Each time we lose one of these artisans, the evolution of golf course design is set back for we lose the subtleties of interpretation so necessary to produce a great golf course. An analogy would be if a gifted composer wrote an imaginative and inspired piece of music, but if the only musicians around to play it were a street corner band, you can imagine the result. This is humorous perhaps, but the same results might be expected if you gave a super golf course plan to a road builder.

Now even I am not so naive as to think that human nature will change and we will acknowledge all of our unsung heroes, but the next time you are impressed by a great golf course, don't just think of the designer, remember the Golf Course Contractor.