

Just one careful owner...

There has been a great deal of discussion in the press and among people in general about the value of the National Lottery lately. Is it creating a nation of compulsive gamblers? Are we diverting funds from other charities? Should we give £50 million to Covent Garden so as they can feed Luciano? And, the most ridiculous of all, are we ruining people's lives when the poor unfortunates manage to win £10 million or so?

In my opinion all this is more than made up for in the fact that it has created a fantastic new pastime, that of dreaming of what we will all do when we win the big one. Many an hour has been spent in the partaking of this hobby. Obviously we all dream of the new cars and houses but I myself like to think in terms of a new golf course.

I remember a friend of mine telling me of a club professional who managed to do just that and built himself his very own course. As we all know club pros are not able to make as much money as they would like and so the course in question was not of the high budget, guaranteed bankruptcy type, with matching gin palace, but was of the worn out nine holer with

en suite wooden shed for a clubhouse. Apart from providing a very regular and lucrative source of income, the club pro in question derived an additional pleasure from his course when the occasional visiting golfer entered his shop to complain. They would pronounce his course appalling in condition and generally undeserving of their pres-

ence. They would then demand to see the manager so as suitable compensation could be arranged. At this point the club pro in question would take immense delight from informing them that he was the manager and would say, "You know what you can do don't you? You can ..!" There then followed a well known two word phrase that I could not possibly repeat on these pages except to tell you that the first word rhymed with what one would need a great deal of in order to win the above mentioned lottery.

Now this professional like many of his counterparts was an especially shrewd businessman. Sure, he would lose the odd customer by his personal indulgence of insulting them but, as he had located his course in the right spot, he knew there would be a steady stream of golfers not only desperate to utilise his excuse for a golf course but also keen to enter his shop where he could make an additional killing by selling them the latest in equipment.

I also remember another equally astute man who was a member of a club I was once employed at. He, so the story goes, was a modest working man that happened to notice an area of land that was up for sale. At this time in the early 70s land prices were low and so he re-mortgaged his house and made a successful bid for it. He then bought a couple of old auto certes and cut out nine tees and nine greens and asked his father to tow in his caravan to be used as some sort of clubhouse and a base in which to remove the punters' money. Incredible so it would seem in today's highly competitive market, they queued up to get to his undulating 1st tee with cash in hand. One must of course remember, in those days golf was coming out of its elitist past and was now attracting the working class.

Several years later and after building up his initial course into something quite respectable, the owner did the same thing again but this time and with the money he had made from his first course, managed to purchase enough land for 18

holes. On this course, however, he built a large clubhouse with a veritable superstore of a professional shop in which he employed a pro for teaching purposes but kept the sale profits for himself. This time it was a steady stream of golfers from the nearby rapidly developing new town that wanted to sample his equally shoddy golf course but now, during the early to mid 80s they came with wads of folding stuff eager to buy the wares he had on offer in his shop. A couple of years later he sold to the Japanese for what was reported to be something in the region of £6 million. He later built another course for cash, this time on prime golfing land and what's more he still has his original nine holer.

Those are a couple of success stories but as we all know, in this industry for every success there is a cataclysmic disaster. I am a great believer in learning from mistakes, preferably those of other people, and I am sometimes astounded at the naivete of some reputedly intelligent people. There are dozens of examples of this. I remember one that a speaker at Harrogate last year told. This was about a Japanese company that wanted to build a top of the range multi million pound golf course in the South of Spain. They located their land and got a top market research company to investigate its feasibility. They were obviously very thorough and noted that there were several other highly exclusive designer label developments in the area, all with their own Arnold Palmer/ Gary Player golf courses and all were empty and losing a fortune. So the market research company handed in their eight volume report together with a bill for £1 million yes £1 million and advised against going ahead. I mean £1 million just for market research, you could build a lovely course for that.

Still, having worked for the Japanese in life before Sludgecombe I can well believe it, but that's a different story. Maybe I am a simple greenkeeper but I could of gone over to Spain for a two week holiday, played the local courses a few times

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and given them the same answer and would have done it all for a mere £500,000.

There is another golf club not far from me at Sludgecombe Pay and Play that has had a painful time of it in its short existence. Without going into too much detail as I could write a book on this disaster area, it was one of those clubs that originally had lofty expectations. You know the type of thing, scenic land, lots of bunkers that looked like miniature versions of the Sahara Desert, ponds, lakes, waterfalls, buggy paths, the works and all designed by a household name. As you can imagine there were the usual major problems associated with this type of £7 million project and the whole thing went into receivership quite early on in its history.

It was, after a few years sold for what seemed like a snip for I believe about £1.5 million but what the new owner didn't recognise was that this course was impossible to maintain. The greens were constructed using pure sand that contained something in the region of 70% fines. Some of them were located in amongst thick woodland, at the bottom of North facing hills and with a surface area of less than 200 square metres. On top of that the course was so mountainous that Chris Bonnington would have had to set up base camp before tackling it. No one wanted to spend around £30 to play it and it cost a fortune just to keep it in bad condition.

Now all the owner had to do was ask a greenkeeper what they thought of it and he would of been informed not to touch it with the proverbial barge pole. Anyone with an ounce of knowledge in the noble subject of greenkeeping could have seen that this place needed digging up and starting again.

However, he went ahead and

purchased the lot and on top of that spent vast sums extending the clubhouse to cater for the hordes of golfers that were going to beat a path to his course. Now I don't have to tell you that this man has now spent several years banging his head against a brick wall or indeed one of his greens which are of a similar texture. Many years down the line, they are in the same hopeless condition and still no one wants to play it. Funnily enough there is one green on the course that is as good a green as any you will find in the country. This is a chipping green built to proper specification by the Course Manager so as to prove his point.

These are sad cases but ones that all those golf mad lottery winners should take a lesson from.

Before you embark on the project of your dreams ask a Greenkeeper. It could save you millions of your hard won money.

Sandy McDivot.
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Sludgecombe Pay and
Play.

