

**Regular readers of these pages will know that I have always had a deep interest in the managerial aspect of golf club life. Warped though I may be, I like nothing better than to pick over the bones of a golf clubs financial capitulation ...**

# Trash equals cash

Recently I have been spoilt for choice in the pursuit of this recreation. Many within my locality are being found in the pages of the Internet under the heading of "For Sale". It is tragic when you think about it. They all had such high aspirations and they all cost such vast sums to build and develop and yet they all found themselves on that slippery slope that leads to total demise. One could begin to believe that financial return on an investment in a golf club is extremely hard to come by. Golf club profit it appears, has a great deal in common with the fifth gear on a certain nameless turf truck that we use; you know it's there, but actually finding it is quite a different matter. I would dearly love to possess my very own golf club, but what with the going rate for a fairly standard 18-holer being about £1.5 million, I find myself with a short fall of a little over £1.5 million. I therefore have to accept the fact that my ideas on what ensures the success of a golf club will remain just fanciful theory.

Quite recently a club in my area came up for sale following the bank's repossession. As this golf club had obviously gone awry, I felt a deep compulsion to attempt a diagnosis of the cause of its failure and so quickly rang up the estate agent concerned. Having received and studied the sales blurb in some detail, I came up with the conclusion that it had basically suffered from chronic and terminal mismanagement from day one. Principally the owner had built what he had envisaged to be an exclusive members' club in what was essentially a depressed ex-mining area. The local community had neither the inclination nor the resources to join such a club and the few that did rarely spent their money in the palatial

clubhouse. On top of that, green fees were set at a level to deter any outsider from venturing on to the far too challenging course and if they did, the welcome left them with little incentive to return. They even got the naming wrong. A short par three course that was part of the complex was named "The Executive Course", a name that instantly gave the impression of an elitism, that visiting mortals were not worthy of. When the owner in a final act of sheer desperation sold off a few life memberships for a couple of grand each, the writing was on the wall. Few took up his offer because of the imminent doom that lay ahead and it was not long after that the banks decided foreclosure was the best policy. Sad though it may be, I have little sympathy for the proprietor, a golf professional who should have known better. He had the opportunity and he blew it big time, not only for himself but for many others as well.

"Well if you're so clever, let's hear how you would do it?" I hear you say. Well thank you very much for your kind offer, I think I will.

Firstly, I would put all feelings of grandeur and vanity firmly to one side. This is in my opinion, the number one mistake that so many golfing entrepreneurs make and they appear to make it time and time again. Why they always have to produce a golf club that is going to be the next Augusta National, I will never know. Lakes, fountains, waterfalls, assorted randomly distributed rockeries, half acre bunkers, buggy paths and contoured fairways that are cut daily by a mower designed for greens. The expense is astronomical and the downfall inevitable, unless backed up by a never-ending supply of cash and a hotel complex to boot.

So making the assumption that

quality equals failure, let us engage in some lateral thought and taking the theory a logical step further, pronounce that lack of quality equals success. An unusual concept I think you will agree but one that I believe can make a great deal of economic sense. Let us further examine the philosophy by way of an example.

There is not far from me a local golf course that is quite frankly appalling. To call it shoddy would be to heap praise upon it. It was built by a farmer who did not play golf and who was like many of his brethren, struggling to the point of near bankruptcy. He got planning permission and cut out a few greens, tees and fairways on what was forty acres of rough pasture. A few trees were planted and a couple of sandpits called bunkers were lobbed in for good measure. The land was flat and featureless and the only strategic elements on this course were an abundance of electricity pylons, which the punters call metal trees. The playing areas are maintained by the farmer himself on an ad hoc basis that appears to be more related to when his wife decides to kick him out of the house rather than the growth requirements of the weeds, or grass as he likes to call it. There is no doubt whatsoever, the course condition is utterly abysmal and at times the place can be seriously dangerous, what with all the errant golf balls and occasional club thrown in wrath. I would not play this course if you paid me but there are many who are more than willing to queue up for the privilege. In fact they love nothing better than to pay just five pounds to hack about on his excuse of a course for a couple of hours. Being nine holes, even the worst family five ball complete with matching shell suits can go from the regional car boot sale,



get round this assault course in two hours or less, a quick refreshment in the semi-derelict wooden shed that is called a clubhouse and they are back home in time for "Blind Date". None of your five hours of torture here, in fact our farming friend can get 50,000 punters round his little gold mine each year without once resorting to advertising. If I were to give him some advice it would be to vary his routes to the bank and try not to laugh too much while doing so. This man using the principal that nothing is too bad for his clientele is making a mint.

I would estimate the total cost of maintaining his enterprise at £50,000 per annum which means he is stashing away about £200,000 profit a year. I'd say that even after the taxman has removed his share, that figure equates to at least a 100% return on his initial investment, which makes the so-called experts look a little stupid.

But I admit the market is somewhat limited for this type of golf. If there already exists a course of such unmitigated lack of distinction in a town, there is little point in building another. It has to be said that eventually the yob culture that inhabit such establishments, like to elevate their status and sample the full-length eighteen-hole variety. So what can we do within this particular market? Well, one of the recurring mistakes that is made by the

golf developer, is to make the course way too difficult. The course then suffers from the once only syndrome. The visitors make a single attempt at playing it and when having been well and truly humiliated by the experience and/or run out of golf balls, they never return. So if I may again use the opposite hypothesis, how about a course that is made to flatter, a course so easy that even the most inept weekend duffer can legitimately claim to produce similar scores to that of Tiger. We are talking huge fairways, monster flat greens, bunkers that are miles out of play and all holes at the minimum length. I would modify the hole cutter to double the size and introduce a local rule that allows a free drop from anything you don't much like the look of I also notice that if you are playing a par four of say 420 odd yards in length, by some strange anomaly of the rules of golf, it miraculously becomes a par five if you happen to be female. Based on this principal, I would bring in a series of local rules whereby an addition of one will be made to the courses par for the sufferance of each of the following:- possession of a hangover, possession of a mortgage, after affects of a dodgy curry, low blood sugar levels, low blood alcohol levels etc etc. By this means one could legitimately raise the par

of the course for an average human being to about ninety-five. Who knows, such a place could prove to be highly popular, a venue where the local community queue up to get in a few sub-par masterpieces with which to comatise their mates with in minute detail down the pub.

But there will always be a ready market for the traditional golf course. So how would I develop such a place? Simple, I would scale up the previously mentioned rough and ready forty acres to around two hundred or so. I know you only require a hundred acres for a golf course but in my opinion there is nothing worse than one of those courses that has been shoehorned into a totally inadequate space. You are then left with a course where one of my usual tee shots that starts left with violent hook, simply ends up on an adjacent fairway. My partners that is a mere fifteen yards off the chosen line on the other hand, ends up behind the compulsory row of poplars, planted by some far off Captain in a desperate attempt to create fairway definition. Such courses are extremely boring, totally unfair and positively dangerous.

Given two hundred or more acres and a course can be given instant appeal. There is space, there is wildlife, there is strategy, and there is seclusion all built in. The course itself would be created largely by

Mother Nature, save for the odd levelled out area for greens and tees and no more than a dozen tactically placed bunkers. I would not have any of your prohibitively expensive USGA specification stuff here and as for irrigation, just give me a mains system with a few hose pipe connections at the back of the greens. One hundred grand and you could have the whole lot built and ready for opening day. Maintenance would be in line with some of those marvellous common land courses which we still have in this land of ours i.e. a greenkeeping complement of about two people with a total budget of around 50K. Ten pounds a round, fifteen at weekends and say thirty thousand pay and play customers a year and you would have a very healthy profit margin indeed. I will stick my neck out and proclaim with confidence that it would work.

So if the R&A would like to invest some of their hard earned millions in one of the above concepts, then I would be delighted to help in the creation of cheap, quality golf for the masses. Just trust me and give me the money. I could even promise not to call my course The McDivot Country Club.

**Sandy McDivot, Head Greenkeeper, Sludgcombe Pay and Play**

