

Making Tracks

Scott MacCallum meets Architect, Jonathan Gaunt, to find out more about building buggy tracks.

Thirty years ago the golfing dream was to head off to Portugal, Spain, or if you were feeling flush, the Carolinas, for a week of golf with a difference. The main difference being the weather and the fact that you'd invariably be wearing shorts – matched, possibly, with long socks, you'd be playing from between palm trees and, of course, you'd be playing out of a buggy.

Invariably buggy golf was perceived to be the preserve of holiday making players, but since then more and more clubs in the UK have identified buggies as a potential lucrative money earner and installed fleets. The need for buggy tracks, therefore, has become much more pressing, not just for new golf developments, but also for existing clubs hoping to benefit from increased revenue.

But there is more to designing a buggy track than you might at first believe. For example you don't want to ruin your signature hole with a two metre wide strip of concrete slicing right through the middle of it, while you can't presume the buggy will be the motorised equivalent of a mountain goat and climb to the top of the club's infamous Cardiac Hill.

One man who has spent more time than most considering the issue of buggy tracks for golf clubs old and new, is renowned Golf Course Architect, Jonathan Gaunt, a man who is keen to ensure that a track doesn't dominate the golf course.

"The buggy track should be secondary to the design of the course but it is an opportunity to make money for a golf club and in that regard they are now a necessary evil," he explained, adding that it was important to do the job correctly to avoid spoiling the visual and playing experience for the golfer.

"A mistake which is so often made the world over is to have the buggy track so close to the fairway that it actually influences play. People will play a shot and find the ball bouncing off a concrete or a tarmac road and into real trouble," explained Jonathan, who now operates as Gaunt Golf Design Ltd from a superb studio in Bakewell, Derbyshire.

"As it is you've got to think carefully about the playability of the hole, the relationship with the buggy track and how it allows you to get people around the golf course without creating enormous



walks from the buggy track to where your ball lands."

Jonathan explained that he didn't think buggies worked as a concept without buggy paths.

"Many clubs have perhaps realised that there was money to be made from buggies and just got them without thinking of the need for a track, and that is wrong.

"The projects we are working on now are on courses that are expected to be in play 365 days a year and the only way you can achieve that is to put in a good drainage system, That is not conducive to buggies on the fairway causing compaction," he said, adding that it jarred with him to see tyre marks running down the middle of a fairway.

"The way we design a buggy track is to hide them in among fairway mounding, hollows or planting.

"It's a matter of standing on the tee and looking down the fairway and if you've designed the buggy track correctly you shouldn't be able to see it too obviously," said Jonathan, adding that while that was the ideal there were occasions where it was impossible to achieve that.

"Sometimes you've got no option. For example, if you've got a terraced fairway on the side of a mountain you have to put the track where you can."

As for occasions where there is no option but to cross the hole with the track there is a right way and a wrong way to do it.

"You don't want to have a crossing point too close to the front of the green. It is much better 100 yards back, but better still for it to be in the carry area closer to the tee."

The general rule of thumb for a golf course architect is that you attempt to design a course to play clockwise so the out of bounds



is generally to the left as more often than not a right handed golfer will slice. With that in mind, generally the buggy track should be on the right side of the fairway so golfers don't have too far to walk to their balls.

While the ideal way of providing buggy track facilities is to build them at the same time as building the golf course existing courses can add them at a later date as well. But again mistakes are made.

"I know of some clubs which have just employed a contractor with a digger and said, 'There's the 1st tee. Off you go.' That's never going to be a good idea. If you sent someone out with a digger you're probably adding 10%-20% more pathway than you would need if you'd designed it beforehand because you wouldn't be finding the most efficient route around the course. For example, you might discover later that the best route is 20 metres further away than you thought as by doing that you would be avoiding some high ground or you could make the path solve a drainage problem at the same time."



The answer, as with most things, is preparation and planning.

"Before you start you want to have a good survey of the course. You want to know what land is available. You want to know where the boundaries are. You need to know where the greens, tees, fairways, bunkers, rough, and, in particular, woodland are, so you can route your track through them and away from the playing area. How do you achieve that?"

"Basically we design something on a computer which creates a 3D model of the golf course. It's like a video which allows you to look at every single hole and see how the buggy track is going to fit into the landscape. If it's a little too high in places you can find a way to drop it behind a mound or through a hollow." Another issue which a well planned survey will reveal is that of gradient.

"I was involved with a new course at Zagaleta, in Spain, an exclusive members club, which in places rose from 170 metres above sea level to 340 metres and we had to get from one end of the course to another in a buggy," said Jonathan, who designed the course with his former partner, Steve Marnoch.

"In order to make the buggy path work, the buggy track was over 10,000 metres long to cover the 6,000 metre course," said Jonathan

"It was like one of those Italian or French Riviera roads with long sweeping curves, but that was the only safe way to do it. It was a massive engineering job."

Jonathan and his team operate to a prescribed safety margin for gradient of no steeper than one metre rise or fall in eight. Buggies can be extremely dangerous if they are allowed to pick up too much speed an accidents on golf courses which have gradients steeper than one in eight are all too common place.

Drainage and the collection of water is an ever more important issue at golf clubs and buggy tracks can actually help in this regard.

"We design drainage systems where we collect every single drop of water that falls on the site and flow it back into a reservoir to supply the irrigation system. The buggy track can work to our benefit because if we direct our drainage trenches or our pipe work along the buggy track they become collection opportunities in the same way as a roof or a car park," he explained, adding that they were doing just that on a four hole extension they are carrying out at Westerwood Golf Club, near Cumbernauld, in Scotland.

Despite being an expert in the provision of buggy tracks, Jonathan is not a huge advocate of buggy golf.

"If I'm honest I'm a traditionalist and much prefer to carry my bag than use a buggy. You don't really get warmed up, or into a rhythm when sitting in the cab of a buggy and you don't get to experience a course as the designer intended if you play from a buggy and that's quite sad really," explained Jonathan, who also sees the financial benefits which an investment in a quality track



could bring.

"A buggy track will pay for itself extremely quickly. Some clubs build the hire of a buggy into their green fee and with clubs charging £15 to £25 for buggy hire it will pay for itself quickly even if a complete track can cost anything from £50,000 to £350,000, dependant on site conditions."

However there is inevitably a conflict whenever buggy golf and the need for paths is involved – you don't want golfers to finish up too far away from their ball while at the same time you don't want a path to be too close to playing areas.

There are other benefits to a track not least allowing the greenkeeping staff quick and easy access without disturbing the playing areas.

"That's particularly important on a new course at grow-in stage. A track can come within 10 metres of a green and the greenkeeper can drive to it on a soil covered site without causing any damage.

"Also a track on a new course means that the developer can drive potential members round the course and show them the stand out holes, without causing damage to the course or visitors' clothing!"

Cutting corners is also to be avoided.

"Tracks should be complete wherever possible, as non tarmac or concrete areas create extremely heavy wear at the funnel points where the buggies join or leave the track and this usual tends to be near the green."

The advice is therefore, on a new build, to think about the track as part of the overall design of the golf course, while on existing courses always commission a survey to ensure that the most efficient, least obtrusive route is adopted.