

A view from a hill

Is what's good for TV, good for average golfer?

BY FRANCES G. TRIMBLE

The desire for "high drama" on the finishing hole at golf courses hosting mayor tournaments has instigated a major new challenge to architects and builders. A case in point is the Woodlands Tournament Players Course, located north of sprawling Houston, Texas.

The Woodlands TPC has been home to the Independent Insurance Agents Open (nee Houston Open) for the last five years. The Bruce Devlin/Bob Von Hagge layout opened for play 12 years ago and the area's PGA Tour event moved to TPC from The Woodlands North course shortly thereafter. For the first time in many years, the tournament's search for a permanent home seemed over.

Everyone was happy . . . for about 5 minutes. But a "Hey, Look Me Over" mentality — the urge to be counted among America's best (Top 25 Resort Courses, GOLF DIGEST, Oct. 1988), has sent TPC management and maintenance back to the drawing board yearly since the move. The most recent alterations play to rave reviews from professionals, spectators, and daily fee golfers alike. Interestingly, nothing changed while everything changed.

Is this a riddle? Richard Luikens, superintendent at the Woodlands TPC and two other on-property courses, describes a need to add more "high drama" to the finishing hole, without touching a blade of grass on the hole itself.



The stadium at Woodlands TPC in Houston, Texas, is a model for others.

Houston Golf Association executive director Duke Butler wanted to create an area which would take the place of and eliminate the expense of erecting and tearing down bleachers which typically accommodated 1,000 spectators at #18 green. tour commissioner Deane Beman's opinion was that so many memorable shots had happened at #18 that changes to the hole itself might not be for the best," advises Luikens.

Truly, the 445 yd par 4, with water curling dangerously close to the green's front right edge, has been the scene of at least three fantastic finishes in recent years.

•Two-time U. S. Open champion Curtis Strange made a cross-country putt to defeat Cal Peete in sudden death in 1986;

•Jay Haas made a long putt to go into extra holes in 1987;

•And in 1988, Curtis Strange birdied #18 to go into a playoff with Greg Norman; he then birdied 18 again to win. Strange said later, the heroic 3-iron approach during regulation gave him the confidence he carried to his first U. S. Open title.

The fat lady sang often and loudly at 18. Hence, it was decided that whatever additions were to be made, would be accomplished around the hole.

Superintendent Luikens says that Duke Butler took photos and measurements at TPC Sawgrass. "Those, and one aerial photograph, were all the specs we had to go on. But TPC Sawgrass was constructed from the outset with the

stadium concept in mind. Whereas, TPC Woodlands was a development golf course that kept getting better over the years even though changes were limited to those which could be made in existing spaces."

In the case of the gigantic stadium mound which now sits at the rear of #18 green, that meant converting an existing hill, with an elevation of 12' to a mammoth pile of dirt triple that size with broad, flat areas on top and access stairs at the rear. To begin, crews cleared an additional 100' behind the green and ultimately a cart trail leading from the 9th green to #10 tee was re-routed.

Luikens says, "We were limited as to how high we could go, simply because for every foot of height

you must have corresponding base and slope. Also, we had a parking lot and a cart barn to contend with."

The stadium setting required 100,000 cu yds of dirt, which came from a Woodlands housing developer in process of digging lakes and streets. "The soil came in, 14 yds at a time, one truck at a time, since there was only one way into the area and one way out. The dirt contractor, was charged with the responsibility of making a very tall, basically round hill. Next, a Conroe (TX) firm with a golf course construction background began the rather tedious, painstaking "notching" process which would result in 9 rows of carved steps, 2' high, 3' wide, and around 120' long."

The work, done with a Caterpillar D-3 bulldozer, is similar to doing brain surgery with a lawn mower and Luikens says, "The operator didn't use anything but a measuring stick to help him get it right. The D-3 has an articulated blade so the operator can cut any sort of pattern he wants even though his machine is sitting on a slope. However, one big consideration was drainage; we didn't want the water to sheet flow down to the green. Instead, the operator created a very slight grade from the center to each end to carry the water away from the green. It worked perfectly. The only other concern we had at this stage was that a summer rain not wash all the grading away before we had a chance to bulkhead."

Hurricane Gilbert, which was expected to ravage the upper Texas Gulf Coast, sent Luikens and his crews scurrying up the hill with thousands of square feet of plastic sheeting to "tarp" the notches after each day's work. However, the storm landed far south of Houston and work proceeded without a hitch. Bulkheading and stairs were added by another Conroe contractor who regularly builds decks and piers for area lakes homes. Irrigation was installed and the stadium area was sodded with Bermuda 419 in early October.

Richard Luikens says the various "jobs" each took longer than expected. "We tended to see each step as requiring less than it actually did. But for having only one aerial photograph and a few basic measurements to start with, I think we did a turnkey job and consequently we won't have to go back in a renovate. We were a little concerned about settling. But we had very few problems along those lines."

The stadium area was originally

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Stadium courses

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projected to accommodate 1,000 spectators; the same number as had been seated in bleachers in years past. "We figured we would need 18 inches per person or 1500 linear feet. In actuality, the last day of the tournament we had probably 3,000 people watching golf from the mound," he said.

"Some of those occupied a "Skybox" for patron sponsors which was constructed on a flat area, to the golfer's right. To the golfer's left was ABC-TV booth. In past years, ABC had to build a tower and put a booth atop that. In 1989, they simply constructed the booth. They had a great view."

Miracle

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age was also critical. "All eight lakes on the course serve as detention for the initial phases of the development," he said.

The earth, Martin said, was essentially topsoil that had to be moved from housing sites. That topsoil was moved onto the fairways, which were sometimes raised two to three feet, well above the recommended six inches.

The rest was clay, which was used under pads of houses. One way to get clay, he said, is to dig lakes; thus the lakes.

"The design will surprise people in the area," said Martin, who has worked with Jim Spear and designed a half-dozen courses before Carillon. "Cenvill went the extra mile to get things done. They were a great client and knew what a golf course can do for a development."

The 18th hole features a peninsula fairway. Water comes into play on 11 holes. There are only 60-plus sand traps but those are 4,000- to 5,000-square-foot traps. And the builders are still busy creating eight- and 13-acre lakes (deep enough to sustain fish) to buffer the golf course into the housing.

"I was quite nervous about it getting done," said Jones. "No one thought it could be done... This is unheard of."

But Kenova's Balogh said: "I love challenges like that. I'd do another one tomorrow."

He may get his chance. He said he has already been contacted by several groups in the Chicago area that are interested in what he calls "The Fast Track Way."

"We came here into this area (southwest Chicago suburbs) from Florida, and we have found one of the finest situations we've ever had — excellent relationships with the unions and suppliers, dedicated managers, and a great labor force, people willing to give you 12 hours of hard work for 12 hours of pay. Even with all the planning and equipment, it takes good people to do a good job."

People will be able to judge that job on July 1 when the Plainfield course officially opens. But Jones added, "You can play three holes right now."

If Luikens has a problem with his dirt pile, it is one he readily accepts. "We have to mow the rows or benches with a Flymo and a Weedeater. It takes about two hours and that's costly. Over the years we've lengthened holes, moved bunkers, put mounding down the sides of fairways, anything to improve individual holes or groups of holes. The big hill behind No 18 will probably benefit more people in more ways."

How does Luikens justify a \$100,000 "bump" on a daily fee course?

"Ask yourself," says Luikens, "does the daily fee golfer deserve a course with all the excitement he would expect to find on a championship tract played by pros? We think he does."

Gary Rippey, TPC's head professional concurs. Rippey adds the course averages 37,000-40,000 rounds per year, of which 25,000 are tournament rounds.

"Those include corporate outings," advises the pro. "Plus, we hosted the Golf Digest ROLEX Intercollegiate and the U. S. G. A. Senior Womens' Amateur this

spring and summer and will host the Lee Trevino State Open this Fall." In 1988, TPC was the site of the Insurance Youth Golf Classic tourney and several qualifying events as well.

The comment of one PGA Tour official to superintendent Luikens sums up the effort and finished product. "He told me that we had the most natural looking stadium on Tour," said Luikens. And a pretty nifty stage for the fat lady's finale as well.

Frances Trimble is a freelance writer based in Houston, Texas.

Sod Producers schedule plans

The American Sod Producers Association's convention dates are set through February 1992.

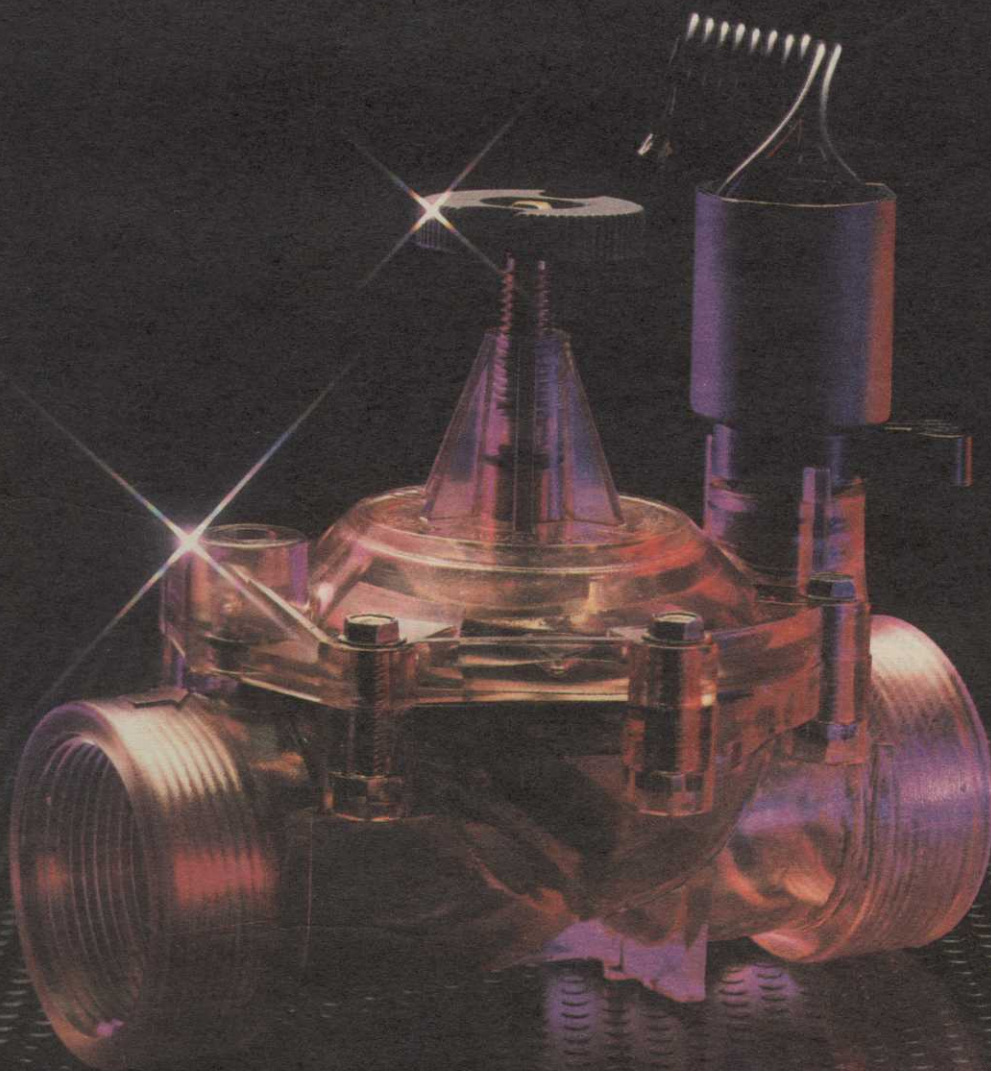
The Feb. 14-16, 1990 midwinter conference in Orlando, Fla., will be followed by the July 25-27 summer convention in Ottawa, Ont.

The Jan. 23-25, 1991, midwinter conference in San Antonio, Texas, will be followed by the July 24-26 summer convention in Santa Barbara, Calif.

The Feb. 5-7, 1992, midwinter conference will be in Las Vegas.

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