

A dream comes true — and on a budget, too

BY MARK LESLIE

Wes Bulen realized a dream in the spring of 1987, and he did it on what most developers would consider a shoestring.

The longtime Minnesota farmer, who had looked over his fields of corn and hay and envisioned a golf course, is already turning a profit on the 18-hole Rum River Hills course that has drawn raves from the golfing public despite being built for a mere \$450,000.

The cornerstones of success for Bulen and his partners are that they already owned the land, they received a low-interest \$450,000 loan from the Small Business Administration, and a small region had no local golf course.

In 1980 Bulen had surveyed the population north of Anoka, Minn., which sits 35 miles northwest of Minneapolis, and found that an area containing 75,000 residents contained not a single golf course.

When investors bought the farm next door for real-estate development and offered land for a golf course, Bulen's plan for a nine-hole layout on his 58-acre spread turned into the 18-hole course over 120 acres.

The six original partners (there are now seven) anted up a total of \$100,000, added a \$50,000 auxiliary loan to the SBA money, and with that \$600,000 built the course plus a clubhouse and restaurant.

A golf-hungry public did the rest.

Right location

Bulen said, "Not many of our local people were golfing because they couldn't get on the courses in Anoka."

But the desire was there: Witness the course's current 140 male members, 100-plus female members, eight 20-student classes, Tuesday night men's tournaments in which more than 100 participate, Wednesday night women's tourneys which draw 80 to 90 golfers, plus tournaments every weekend this summer.

A public facility, Rum River Hills has 100 members paying \$350 apiece, and 200 who pay \$50 for tee-time privileges. The owners just raised the greens fee \$1 to \$13.

Other income is coming from golf car

rentals, the pro shop and lessons, and the lease on the restaurant which one recent Friday night served 256 meals after 5 p.m.

Low-cost construction

The Rum River Hills partners hired pro-turned-architect Joel Goldstrand of St. Louis Park, Minn., to design the course.

The result, Bulen said, is "a beautiful course with water in play on 12 holes, making it very challenging but also very pretty."

"We did move some dirt," Bulen said, "but not like a lot of courses. We built up mounds for aesthetics and, on a couple of holes, to protect golfers. We had the 40-acre pond, so we didn't have to make one.

"And it's a nice topography, rolling but with no steep hills or slopes. There are also trees interspersed, and we planted a lot of shrubbery."

Goldstrand, who with Ron Bloom, his partner in Fairway Architects Inc., has designed courses in Minnesota, the Dakotas, Iowa and Wisconsin, said the crucial factor in keeping construction costs down is the routing.

"Routing can make a big difference," he said. "You try to route so that you use existing land. You can get the vision (of the fairway or green) you need by routing, and a lot of earth-moving is not necessary."

Goldstrand said the Rum River builders saved a lot of money by:

- buying the heads from an existing irrigation system;
- using peat and sand on the site for the green mix, something not always recommended or even possible;
- not needing to plant trees or building water hazards.

"You can build a golf course for less than \$1 million," Goldstrand said.

"You can build a good course for \$700,000 to \$800,000 — in the right situation and not including land costs. We're building a lot of low-cost courses because many people flat-out don't have the money (for a more expensive one)."

"We're not the only ones in the country who can do it," he said. "But we're also not making a lot of money."



Joel Goldstrand working on the routing at the site of Rum River Hills.

Major savings

Dick Tollette, one of the Rum River Hills owners and director of golf at Bunker Hills, said there are three main areas in which money can be saved building a course:

- Perform a feasibility study or hire one done, he suggested. He said PGA of America members can get guidelines from the association which he wrote for his master's thesis that will help them do their own feasibility study.

"That's how we sold the Rum River Hills idea to the SBA," he said.

- Find an architect who you can depend on not going over budget. Investigate the architects' backgrounds and the projects they have done.

"Some of them are tremendously capable of using natural aesthetics without moving a lot of ground," Tollette said. "Going into the project, tell the architect where you want to be (financially) when the project is complete, and a good architect will design it that way."

Some architects charge a percentage, like 10 percent, of the total course cost while some quote a price for their services.

- Go out to bid at the right time; that is, during February or March when contrac-

tors are looking for work rather than during the summer when they have plenty.

Shop around

Tollette said hidden savings can be found in shopping around, if you have the time, such as Rum River Hills' purchase of the irrigation equipment; or to buy used equipment and get a good mechanic.

The normal expenditure to outfit a golf course is \$100,000; Rum River Hills spent \$60,000 four years ago.

But Tolleite said it is important not to scrimp on the pumping station, which "is the key to the whole golf course," or on golf cars (members don't want to ride used cars), or key mowing equipment.

When you do it right, building a course is a fulfillment in itself for some.

"It was a big dream," Bulen said. "It's also a heck of an asset to the community, and to our family estate, I might add. It's going to go to our heirs."

Bulen said that had the course cost the investors \$1 million instead of \$600,000 he still feels they would be able to meet the loan payments this year.

"We estimate a \$1,300,000 appraisal on the property right now," he said.

Captains: Making it with no housing

Is it necessary that golf course developers link up with real-estate forces to insure success of a project?

That trend of the past 30 years now is the standard in approximately 90 percent of new course ventures.

But one course in New England has substituted individualism and astute management. It is making money the old-fashioned way — the way golf courses long survived and prospered. Prudent supervision and fortuitous location in an area in need of a course are the keys.

In a setting increasingly pegged to real estate for financial security, the Captains Golf Course owned and operated by the town of Brewster, Mass., is unique.

There are no homes in sight around the 18-hole municipal layout. In a throwback to the past, the Captains stands on its own.

The \$2.2-million bond issue that propelled the course into operation in 1985 is being repaid on schedule.

Receipts exceed the most optimistic outlook and Jim Stewart, Golf Course Commission chairman, sees a bright future.

As evidence of the course's popularity and quality, Golf Digest cited the Captains, designed by Massachusetts architects Geoffrey S. Cornish and Brian Silva, as the

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finest 18-hole municipal course built in the United States in 1985, and bestowed "most attractive" hole accolade to the par 3, 155-yard 11th.

After an open winter and temporary greens that satisfied the golfing diehards, the Captains course went back into full operation April 1.

Tee times are required. That means a phone call for playing reservations, two days in advance, by 5 p.m.

The first foursome is on the tee box at 7 a.m. The superintendent and his crew, on the job since 5 a.m., have readied the course for action.

The Captains lists a membership of 750. Six hundred of the town's 7,000 residents belong. The remaining members are juniors and those drawn from nearby towns

with no municipal course. There's no more room for non-residents. Guest play can climb to 128 persons a day.

Residents pay \$250 annually, non-residents \$500.

Club policy tee times is: members as the lead foursome, non-members or guests in the second group at 7:08 and staggered in that manner until 3 p.m., when play is on a first-come, first-off basis.

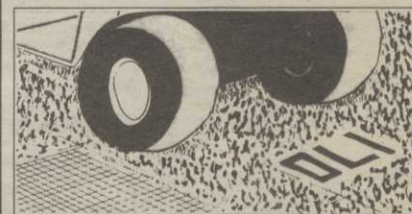
Donald Deay, pro/manager who also gives lessons and handles the driving range, tracks course play. Future traffic flow will be controlled by computer. Reservations will be stored in the computer system. Guests may make reservations up to 60 days in advance. If the \$100 foursome fee isn't in by reservation deadline, the computer wipes out the names.

Stewart said the town of Brewster had a stroke of fortune in landing the services of much-honored superintendent Sherwood A. Moore.

Moore was contemplating retirement after shepherding the 1984 U.S. Open at Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, N.Y. He was lured to the Captains course in 1985 as "Clerk of the Works." Green supervision followed. He now serves on a consulting basis.

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