

Keeping up with the Joneses

"Why remodel your course? You should try to make a golf course the best it can be. Why paint your house every five years or refurnish it every so many years? Nobody's hitting golf balls at your house. Nobody's taking divots out of your furniture. Nobody's driving golf carts across it. And old man winter and old woman summer aren't beating on it, either. And...your anatomy has been the same since the 1900s, yet golf balls are flying 300 yards in the air today.

"If your house needs work, why doesn't your golf course, too?"

— Brian Silva,
golf course architect

BY MARK LESLIE

A golf course remodeling boom is sweeping the United States just as new course construction figures are soaring.

Across the country, public, private and even resort courses are getting facelifts. It can be minor mending, like leveling tees or re-draining bunkers. Or it can be major surgery, like rebuilding all 18 greens, adding tees and installing a state-of-the-art irrigation system.

Whatever the extent, remodeling work is rising in all segments of the industry, and the money is big: from \$300,000 to \$500,000 to rebuild the greens to millions for more comprehensive work.

For many courses, the motivation is "do or die."

"Keep up with the Joneses," said one architect, or you lose players to clubs with newer, better greens, playability and landscaping. Eventually you go out of business.

"Some of the older, established clubs were looking at just that," said architect Robert Walker of Atlantic Beach, Fla. "The clubs built in the 1920s and '30s are the ones that have all the old money and the old tradition, and these guys aren't going to let that (going out of business) happen to their clubs. There's too much to lose. So remodeling is the only alternative..."

Walker explained that at San Jose Country Club in Jacksonville, Fla., where he last year finished a complete remodeling, the club had "a standoff" between older members, who didn't want the Donald Ross course touched in any way, and younger members, who are well traveled and have seen changes in design trends that have meant better quality, maintenance and irrigation.

Walker said that if improvements weren't made, San Jose CC might have faced the same fate as another area course about 10 years ago, whose members deserted it. "It's now condominiums," he said.

Hundreds of country clubs are aging. Their greens are old and were designed decades ago to withstand much less traffic than they are experiencing today. They have few or no cart paths. They may have just one or two sets of tees. Drainage is insufficient. Improvements in equipment have eroded the shot values of their holes. Their members are demanding superior playing surfaces.

"Golf has taken off across the United States, especially in the Sunbelt," said South Carolina architect John LaFoy. "You have a lot of courses that for years and years were the only game in town, or they didn't have a lot of competition. And with the influx of new golf courses, many of which are top-notch, the older courses are having to renovate basically to keep up with the competition.

"Also, a lot are flat worn-out."

Affluence — and efforts to attract affluence — also are creating renovation projects.

Architect Steve Smyers of Tampa, Fla., who has redesigned Cheval Polo and Golf Club there, said owners wanted a quality golf course



At the Phoenixian Resort in Arizona, remodeling included building nine tees into the mountainside. Note the location of the tees and green in photo at left. Above, a golfer tees off from the mountainside.

to help in selling "very upscale homes around an upscale country club community. They felt the golf course needed a new facelift."

Charles Ankrom, an architect headquartered in Stuart, Fla., added: "Because of the new affluence in clubs, they're saying, 'Let's do it better. A lot of retirees have nothing to do but play golf, so let's make it better for them — better grasses, greens, irrigation — so that there's nothing left to make better.'"

"Five or six years ago, members started deciding they wanted a '9' course on a scale of 10 instead of a '4' or '5.'"

Ankrom said houses in Florida retirement developments once sold for \$10,000 to \$13,000. "Now it's \$300,000 to \$500,000, so the whole method of golf course development has changed. There's more money for developments and for golf courses and golf course remodeling.

"Everyone wants a taste of the good life."

Meanwhile, even resort owners are improving their courses, as witnessed around Phoenix, Ariz., where both Stone Creek, The Golf Club (formerly Anasazi Golf Course) and The Phoenixian Resort have undergone major renovations.

Stone Creek manager Henry DeLozier, president of Resort Management of America, said the facility is a resort course without a resort and it caters to golfers at a dozen first-class resorts in the area without courses.

He said when Westcor bought Stone Creek its motivation to renovate "was primarily driven by the importance of repositioning the golf course in the local and resort golf market. In its previous life it had developed a reputation as being too severe, unenjoyable to play and as having been in poor condition. We determined that in order to overcome that reputation we needed to improve its design. We set out to do that by engaging (architect) Arthur Hills and Associates and Wadsworth Co. to build it."

The Phoenixian hired architect Homer Flint to totally remodel 13 holes and design five new holes.

Director of Golf John Jackson said Flint's design included smaller greens, remounding, rebunkering, sealing lakes, building new cart paths, and planting "an unbelievable number of palm trees."

Why? "It was a different thought pattern than what (ex-owner) Charlie Keating and American Continental had wanted," said David Gilbertson of Evans/Artigue in Phoenix, which handles the resort's marketing. "It wasn't a bad course at all... Flint dressed it up to be a great resort-type course."

The goal

The aim for course members and officials in remodeling is better playability, maintainability and aesthetics.

"Golf courses either get better or they get worse," said LaFoy, who is remodeling several courses. "If you're not continuously ... improving a golf course — using new technology such as green construction — eventually it's going to get worse."

According to Walker, greens are the priority item for his clients — "then the tees; then bunkers and contouring and drainage of fairways; and a lot of cart path work."

LaFoy agrees, saying most of his clients are rebuilding every green.

Yet Brian Silva, of the architectural firm Cornish & Silva in Whitinsville and Amherst, Mass., said that is not true at courses where he has worked.

"I don't have many courses that re-do all their greens," Silva said. "The bulk of cost is being spent on bunker and tee renovation and reconstruction, and a few greens."

He added: "Forward tees are a big part of renovation work. We pay a lot of attention to multiple tees. Normally we put in four sets of tees.

"I'm seeing 50-year-old golf courses where the average markers for the men are 6,200 yards and the average markers for the women are 6,100 yards."

At many courses, the tinkering starts the moment it opens — and it never ends.

Edward H. Connor III, a Ponce Inlet, Fla., architect who has studied designs of many famous courses of masters like Donald Ross and A.W. Tillinghast, said: "The plain fact is that no course is ever complete. Each alteration, particularly if done by the original designer, brings the picture a little closer to perfect focus."

Ross, for instance, toyed with Pinehurst #2 from the time it opened for play in 1907 until his death in 1948.

Andy Banfield, a senior designer with Tom Fazio Golf Course Designers in Hendersonville, N.C., said he and Fazio have fine-tuned Canada's number one-ranked course, National Golf Club in Woodbridge, Ontario, almost since it opened in 1976.

"We've been doing a little here and there the last five or six years. Various things, from cart path adjustments to greens contours," Banfield said.

When The National changed from a low-membership golfers' club to a corporate-type

facility with many new golfers and a lot of play, it meant some greens were too small.

"They had not been designed with enough size and pin placements to handle the high traffic," Banfield said.

Banfield said that even the best-ranked course is pushed by competition. "The National is feeling that, too, because of the (nearby) Devil's Pulpit course," he said.

LaFoy said Augusta National may be the best example of continual course improvement. LaFoy worked for several years with George Cobb, a consultant with Augusta National for about 20 years.

"Even though from year to year you go there and don't notice any changes, every year we'd get a five-page list of changes to the golf course. It may be just re-draining bunkers, redoing drainage work in fairways, recutting and re-designing bunkers, or releveling or rebuilding tees... You're continually doing it just to keep it getting better.

"Your entire purpose may not be to change the course but to see that its quality continues to improve. If you're not improving it, it's getting worse."

Banfield said that in many cases, one planned change leads to others.

While improving the irrigation system, the owner and designer may decide to change a green that doesn't drain well. "Then you re-grade that and it's 'Let's add a bunker,'" he said.

Cart paths are another major item.

"Courses built 10 years ago probably didn't have a wall-to-wall cart system," Banfield said. "Probably 60 percent of them do now. With more and more play being with carts, it's almost imperative that you have a cart path system."

Indeed, Southern Concrete Pavers President Pat Bresnahan reports his Lecanto, Fla., company is tearing out the asphalt cart paths at one Doral Country Club course and installing new concrete paths. The price tag: \$175,000.

"It's amazing how many courses want to improve their paths," Bresnahan said.

Meanwhile, some courses, like Cheval, decide a total remake is necessary.

"We totally renovated the 18 holes," said Smyers. "There's not a speck of dirt we didn't touch.

"It cost \$2.5 million. We installed a new irrigation system, contoured all the fairways, filled in some lakes, dug some lakes... built 18 new greens to USGA specs."

And Walker, after showing San Jose CC

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Renovations

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members the greens and drainage problems, did "a total, total re-do — tear-up and reroute and clear and grub and irrigate and drain and excavate lakes and lagoons."

Time and acceptance

Walker's comprehensive remake of San Jose took 10 months to complete. While it was being done, members worked a deal with a nearby course and played there.

Hills closed Anasazi in June 1988 and the new Stone Creek opened in January 1989.

"A lot of clubs have a big question on timing," Walker said. "Anybody undergoing a renovation program struggles with the idea: Do you do three holes now and three next year, or do you close down nine and do nine this year and nine next year?"

"Ideally, the best way to do it is to bite the bullet, shut it down, get in there one time and knock it out. It took us 10 months at San Jose; it was a really big project. But for some clubs they could make quite a bit of improvements in a short amount of time, depending on if they are in the North or South. In the South we could do the work in six to eight months. In the North it may make sense to do nine holes at a time."

Snow

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have used it to justify major capital expenditures or the need for more labor. But its most important function may be dousing fires.

"We're fire fighters," said Snow. "One club may be having a problem that we've already seen at 20 or 30 other clubs. This year's winter damage is a good example. It was extensive throughout the northern part of the country. But people at one club may not realize other courses are having the same problem. It's a relief to the membership, and particularly the superintendent, to know that."

Snow rarely visits a course now, something he misses. Still he enjoys his new responsibilities, which include editing the Green Section Record.

"I'm going to be requesting a technical editor/writer to help with that," said Snow.

Mike Kenna, the recently named director of Green Section research, has helped remove some of the burden in that area.

Still, Snow admits to being "a bit overwhelmed" by his new position and having gained a new respect for what his predecessor accomplished.

"Maybe I came at this job from a naive standpoint. I didn't realize how much administrative detail there would be. If it were just a matter of editing the Green Section Record, chairing the Turfgrass Research Committee and overseeing the staff that would be OK. But with all these other things..."

"Like a reporter calling for a 10-minute interview that ends up dragging on for 45?" he was asked.

"Yeah, like that," he answered with a chuckle.

In the final analysis, a project's success is measured by the response of the golfers.

Reports at those courses seem to support that more play is a norm after remodeling.

Walker said the response from members at San Jose has been "overwhelmingly positive. That's been the most gratifying and rewarding aspect of the entire project."

Ankrom said he remodeled the North Course Ft. Lauderdale (Fla.) Country Club, and now 75 percent of the play at the club is on that course. "And some of the 25 percent of play on the South Course is because people can't get onto the North Course," he said. "Now they've offered me twice

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— Brian Silva

as much for South Course remodeling."

DeLozier at Stone Creek said: "We're extremely happy with the results. It has been very well received by the local golfer, plus we're getting considerable business from area resorts."

DeLozier said a key to success is

having "a very clear-cut objective that ... everyone has bought off on."

"The people at Westcor very clearly understood what they wanted the end result to be. As a result, Hills, Wadsworth and our company were all able to deliver it."

Who's a target?

Meanwhile, clubs should closely analyze whether they actually need a renovation project.

Silva relates this story:

"One Boston area course wanted to renovate. I told them they had a great example of the 1960s-style cape and bay bunkers and they had done a wonderful job of maintaining them. 'Why do you want to rebuild them?' I

asked. Their answer was 'Because everyone else is.'

And yet, "there is a significant number of candidates worthy of renovation work," Silva said. "Young players want to do a lot — some of it radical. Older ones don't want to do that much. Probably the best place is right in the middle."

"I hear people say, 'Let's put in some railroad ties' and 'I saw a bunker on a course that was 20 feet deep; can we put one of those in here?' and 'Can't we put in the church pews?'"

"I just say, 'Let's just try to make it appropriate to this club.'"

Silva added: "Why remodel? Because you should try to make a golf course the best it can be."



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