

"Driving the Green" fascinating for all readers



Bighorn in Palm Desert, Calif. (above) is a recent Arthur Hills' creation. Hills was also architect of Ironhorse Golf Course, the Palm Beach County, Fla., facility that is the subject of John Strawn's book, "Driving the Green: The Making of a Golf Course."

By Peter Blais

It's hard to imagine writing a book about building a golf course anyone other than a builder, architect or superintendent would find particularly interesting.

But much to his credit, in "Driving the Green: The Making of a Golf Course," John Strawn has created a 344-page work that should entertain even those who have never picked up a golf club.

"Driving the Green" is the story of Ironhorse Golf Course in Palm Beach County, Fla. It details the legal, financial and permitting obstacles that had to be overcome and the twice-as-long-as-expected, four-year process of building the course — problems most developers are all too familiar with.

While details of putting together the deal, designing the course and moving dirt are interesting in their own right, it is Strawn's portrayal of the personalities behind Ironhorse that keeps the story moving.

One of the most intriguing characters is Alan Sher, the millionaire button manufacturer who took an option on the 354-acre former horse ranch property with the idea of building an exclusive golf course community. Sher envisioned a maximum of 200 luxury homes surrounded by a beautiful golf course where he and his friends could tee it up within a couple of years.

But Sher soon discovered building a course was not as easy as it appeared. He spent \$40,000 just to find there was no right-of-way into his property. Then there was the Bird Lady, Rosa Durando, a transplanted New Yorker who slowed Ironhorse with protests the course would damage the birds, water and scenery she had moved to Florida to enjoy.

Sher suffered many a sleepless night as the project dragged on, eating into his declining fortune.

Sher finally sold most of his interest to Joshua Moss, a no-nonsense developer from Washington, D.C. It saddened Sher to see Moss altering his dream by adding more than 100 house lots and reining in some of the design excesses.

The fashion-conscious Sher originally wanted Pete Dye, next to Robert Trent Jones Sr. perhaps the most famous non-PGA player/architect in the business, to design his course. But Sher and Dye parted company over Dye's decision to do nearby Old Marsh. Sher then turned to Arthur Hills, whose work at Wilderness and Bonita Bay near Naples Sher admired.

Hills, the busiest architect in the United States according to Golf Digest, is portrayed as a man who loves to please clients, but also possessed with "an obsession to achieve." Yet pleasing Sher, who "treated Hills as if he were the royal course designer," was easier than pleasing the bottom line-oriented Muss. The dual desires to please and achieve conflicted late in the building process.

Tempers flared when Hills wanted to fill in an already-constructed bunker he considered unnecessary. Jon Harpman, Muss' nephew and his uncle's assistant at the job site, refused to fill in a bunker

that already had sand and drainage.

The normally soft-spoken Hills exploded, offering, in very colorful language, to pay for removing it himself. Later, Muss firmly told Hills not to castigate his nephew for his uncle's decision. Hills apologized to Harpman.

"Hell, I thought I'd bust out laughing," said shaper Willie Owsley, the artist with the bulldozer who finally removed the bunker he had earlier created. Owsley learned his craft from a retired shaper who went to jail after trying to use his pension to finance a cocaine deal.

"I learned from the best," Owsley said of his mentor. "He could shape swales that would make water think."

It's people like Owsley, Hills, Muss, Sher and the rest of the Ironhorse lineup that makes "Driving the Green" an enjoyable read between rounds.

Strawn grew up in southern Illinois and lives in Portland, Ore. He taught history at Reed College, then spent a decade in the construction business. This is his first book. It costs \$25 and is published by HarperCollins Publishers in New York.



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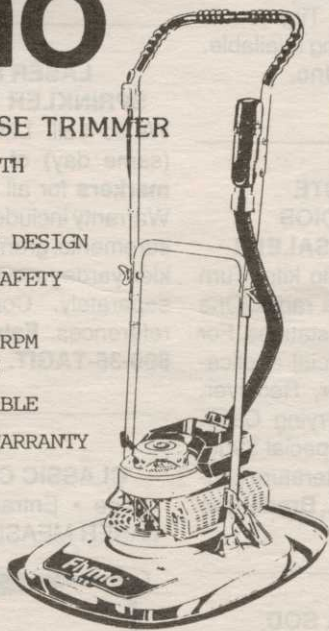
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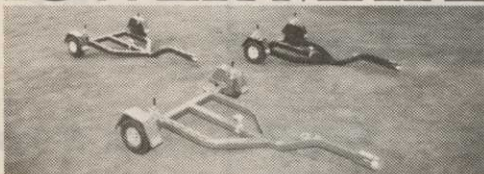
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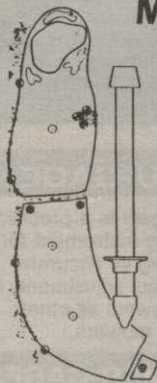


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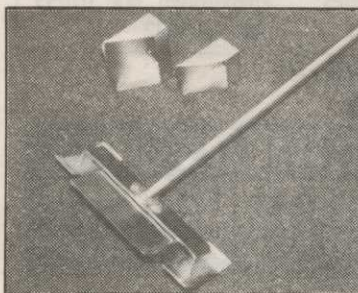


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