

Years of frustration come to an end for Southern California Golf Ass'n

By PETER BLAIS

If anyone knows the frustrations a golf association can encounter in developing its own golf course, it's Newell Pinch.

Pinch joined the Southern California Golf Association as executive director in 1965. He advanced to chief executive officer in 1987. Since retiring late last year, Pinch has consulted for the SCGA as it closes in on its 13-year search for its own course.

Pinch was there in 1981 when the SCGA board of directors decided to follow the lead of the Northern California Golf Association—which was building Poppy Hills—and build its own facility, too.

He sweated through the three-year dance with the Irvine Co. Their joint attempt to build a course in Laguna Beach ended in 1984 when they failed to overcome protests from environmentalists concerned about preserving the area's woodlands.

He got burned during the five-year flare-up over Boy Scouts of America-owned Firestone Ranch in Brea. The SCGA and scouts had agreed to a 99-year lease for an 18-hole course to be constructed on scout property. But environmental groups again spiked the deal, this time bemoaning the loss of oak trees and making access to the property so costly the project simply became too expensive.

"We had \$750,000 in hard cash tied up in those two projects," Pinch said.

When Firestone Ranch withered on the vine in late 1992, the board decided to turn its attention to *acquiring* rather than *building* a golf course.

The board looked at a dozen sites before settling on Rancho California in Murrieta. The Robert Trent Jones Sr. design first opened in 1970. It was a quality layout that had fallen into some disrepair because of the financial difficulties of the previous two owners.

"It was a fixer-upper," Pinch said, "but the quality was still there. We negotiated for enough land to eventually build another nine holes. And someday we'll construct a new clubhouse to replace the double-wide trailer there now. That's not a big priority, though."

The SCGA was scheduled to close the Rancho California deal in late January. The long-sought acquisition will fulfill the group's two major goals — providing a site for association tournaments and an additional source of income.

"Golf associations operate 99 percent off dues," Pinch noted. "Any additional revenue is a big help."

Pinch has learned much from the 13-year effort to land an association course. And he has increasingly been asked to share that knowledge as more state and regional golf associations look at

developing courses of their own.

Following is a summation of the more important lessons, Pinch said, he has learned:

- First and foremost, find someone to perform an objective financial analysis of the association and how owning a golf course would affect it.

- Perform a feasibility study on any proposed construction or acquisition. It can't be put in a place that suits everybody. So put it in a place where it will make money.

- Don't expect someone to pro-

vide funding simply because golf associations are big and do good things. Most associations raise dues to fund a course. But that isn't always easy to do.

- Buying is easier than building. Building is a tremendous risk. The SCGA spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in Laguna Beach and Brea, but has nothing to show for it.

- Member courses will likely be upset about competition from a nearby association facility. Don't be surprised to lose a few of those members. Chances are they will

return once they see the benefits.

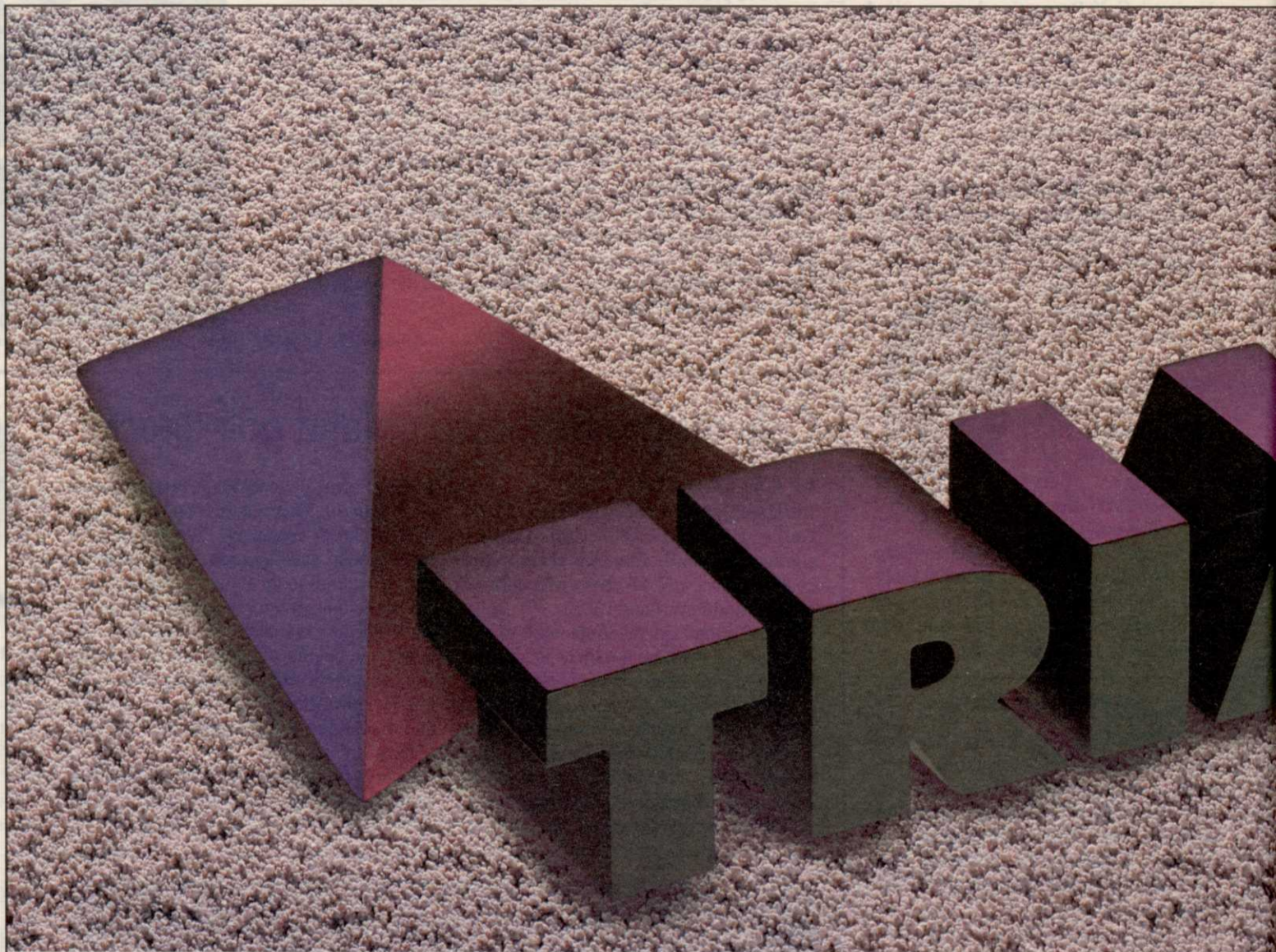
- Golf associations are non-profit organizations. Golf courses make money. That combination will create problems if the association hopes to keep its non-profit status. So expect to spend a lot of time with lawyers.

- Working with developers who want to donate land can be difficult. Developers usually want to keep the best land for house lots and give away what's left for the course. Poor land can make for a costly course.

- Time can work against a golf

facility ever being built. For example, when the idea is first presented, 70 percent of the board may be for it. Five years later, when the research is done and a decision is needed, the board members have changed and only 40 percent may want to go ahead with the plan.

- Expect differences of opinion regarding the type of course to build. Some egos will demand a PGA-caliber facility in appearance and difficulty. But, remember who will play the course. Golf association members. Amateurs.



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