

By J. BARRY MOTHE

CAMARILLO, Calif. — Less than two years ago, a weekend green fee at the daily-fee Camarillo Springs Golf Course here in southern California was \$40.

Today, the weekend green fee is \$50. The demand for play — up to 40 percent of the calls for weekend tee times are turned down — has shown no signs of slowing down.

How did the golf course operator, in this case American Golf Corp. (AGC), pull this off? Not by building call-ahead snack huts on every hole or opening a disco

Daily-fee challenge: Upgrade or perish

in the clubhouse bar.

"Basically we worked on improving the drainage irrigation and overseeding the fairways to get the best wintertime turf," said Kevin Roberts of AGC. "You can't spend too much money on things besides the golf course, because that's why they come."

The course is also close to completing a network of paved cart paths which should improve the quality of the fairways.

What's taken place at Camarillo Springs over the past

two years is typical of the trend of "upscaling" or "upgrading" a golf course: Improving the quality of a golf course and thereby moving it into a higher price bracket for green fees and improving its value.

Whether it's major golf course management companies like AGC mid-size operations like LinksCorp, or even small "mom-and-pop" operations, many owners and operators are looking for ways to move their golf courses up to the next level:

From modest municipal to low-end daily-fee; from low-end daily-fee to high-daily fee, and so on.

Further, buying a golf course, then upscaling it can still be less expensive than building a new course from scratch.

"The key to all of this is knowing where and how much to spend," said Larry Hirsh, a golf course appraising specialist based in Harrisburg, Pa., and past president of the Society of Golf Appraisers. Hirsh, who specializes in appraising and feasi-

bility studies for golf courses, said a thorough market analysis is the place to start.

"You really need to do a market analysis, a cash-flow analysis and a cost-benefit analysis," said Hirsh. "Sometimes these things are a slam dunk. But most of the time you need to get your ducks in a row."

Hirsh recently put together a list of the seven factors he considers most responsible for adding value to a golf course. They are, in order of importance:

1. Course Conditioning — Are players inclined to return because green are in great shape? Are fairways wide enough or too wide? Has the course's appearance been enhanced with mulched beds, ornamental grasses and flowers? Do amenities such as tee signs, ball washers, benches, hole liners, etc. add to the property's overall image?

2. Pace of Play — A brisk pace increases the enjoyment of most players, allows more people to play and improves the course's income-generating potential. Large tees quicken the game, while providing adequate areas for all levels of players. Hazards should not penalize novice and average golfers too severely or constantly create bottlenecks. Rangers and yardage markers also help keep the game moving.

3. Location — Does your golf facility have good visibility from the highway? Use directional signs and a clearly marked entrance to make sure people know where you are and how to get there. If you are making improvements, put up a sign to inform the public.

4. Practice Range — Ranges are relatively low-cost, high-revenue facilities. If your golf property doesn't have one, consider building one with good tee areas, targets and floodlights. Are teaching facilities available?

5. Clubhouse — Don't overdo clubhouse services, especially at public facilities. Hot dogs and beer fit the bill at most daily-fee courses. However, an attractive pro shop, stocked with desirable clothing, club lines and logoed merchandise usually is a good investment.

6. Maintenance — Avoid difficult maintenance areas or outdated methods that add to operating costs. Practices to examine include manual vs. automatic irrigation, hand-mowed vs. triple-mowed green, rough maintenance and bunker appearance/consistency.

7. Special Events — Depending on your market, hosting tour events, U.S. Golf Association qualifiers and amateur college competitions may have bottom-line benefits.

Roberts of AGC, which operates about 200 golf courses, 135 of them municipals, daily fees and resorts, said the increasing sophistication and expectations of the average golfer over the past 10 years have made

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GOLF COURSE NEWS

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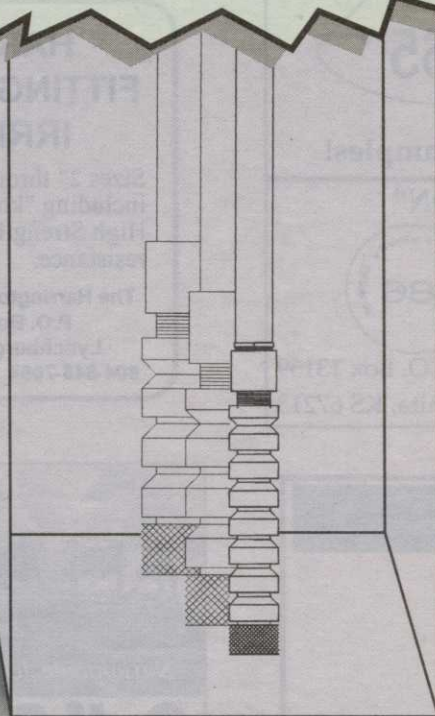
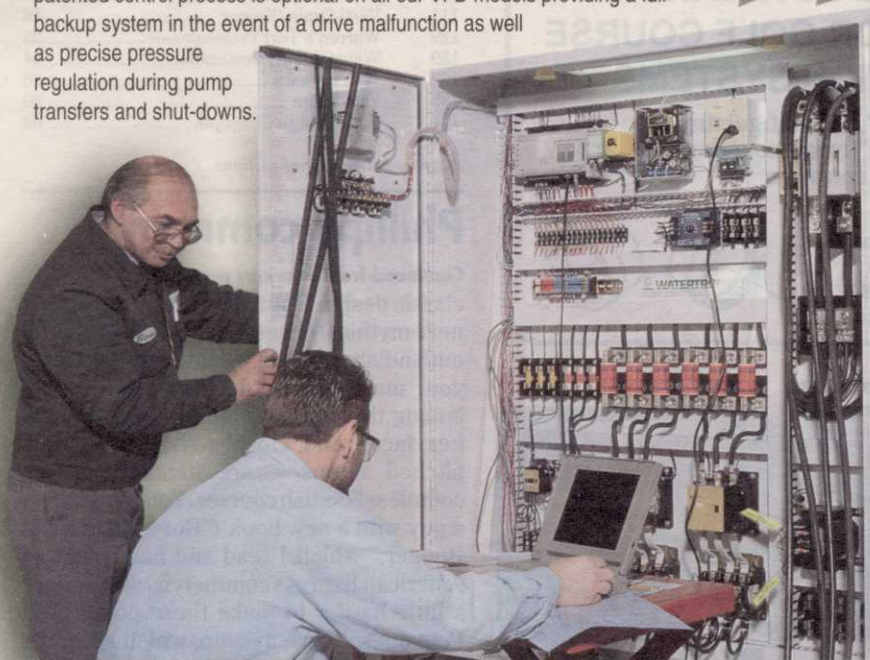
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CIRCLE #162

Brit speakers to spice Americans' plate

Well-known British turf experts and a panel of British golf architects will be featured speakers at the annual meeting of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, April 22-29, in Scotland.

R.J. Price, author and lecturer, will discuss "The Landscapes of Scotland's Golf Courses" and James Kidd, director of turfgrass management at Gleneagles, will review the famed course's "Integrated Ecological Management Plan" at Turnberry Hotel on April 22.

The British Institute of Golf Course Architects will meet with ASGCA counterparts at the Russacks Hotel in St. Andrews April 26. Presi-

dent Joan Dudok van Heel, Chairman Cameron Sinclair, and Vice Chairman Martin Hawtree will lead the British delegation, which also will include two committee chairmen, Simon Gidman and Howard Swan.

ASGCA President Don Knott expects a record turnout for this Scottish meeting. "We first visited Scotland in 1980 as a group, and it turned out to be a critical point in the society's development," he said. "The visits to golf's historic courses had such an impact on our membership that we voted to have a meeting in the UK every five years, and since have benefited greatly from trips to Ireland and England."

Hills design makes 54 at Bonita Bay

BONITA BAY, Fla. — With the opening of Bay Island, its third championship golf course, Bonita Bay offers 54 holes of golf.

Designed by Arthur Hills, Bay Island opened in early November. It joins The Marsh and Creekside, Bonita Bay's other courses which also boast Hills' signature. In the Bonita Bay tradition, all three courses enhance the existing features of the land and preserve the natural beauty of the property bordered by Spring Creek, Estero Bay and the Imperial River. A wetlands slough frames many of the holes and several on the new Bay Island course play along Estero Bay.

Construction actually netted two new courses for Bonita Bay Club. "We split The Marsh, our original signature course, and combined nine of its holes with nine new holes to form Bay Island," explained Ed Rodgers, vice president of club operations for Bonita Bay Properties, Inc.

"We built nine new holes for The Marsh and brought all greens up to United States Golf Association specifications."

Upscale or die

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upscale a necessary and desirable goal for many operators.

"Golfers expect a lot more on a public-access course than they did 10 to 15 years ago," said Roberts. "They want to come out and experience more of a country club atmosphere."

Beryl Artz, executive vice-president of Golf Corp., which operates 36 daily-fee public access courses in six states and more than 100 private courses, said Golf Corp. is looking into upscaling an older municipal course that is a unique example of golf course design. In this instance, history and aesthetics are inspiring the upgrade.

"It's in the preliminary stages but we're definitely looking at it," said Artz. "One of the questions is, can we take it to the next level? We think we can."

Upscaling is not an automatic success story. The key, say those with experience, is knowing the demand and needs of the market, and where to target the money. The most common mistakes are misunderstanding what golfers will see as an increased value for their dollar, and spending too much on improvements without having the golfers to pay the subsequently higher green fees.

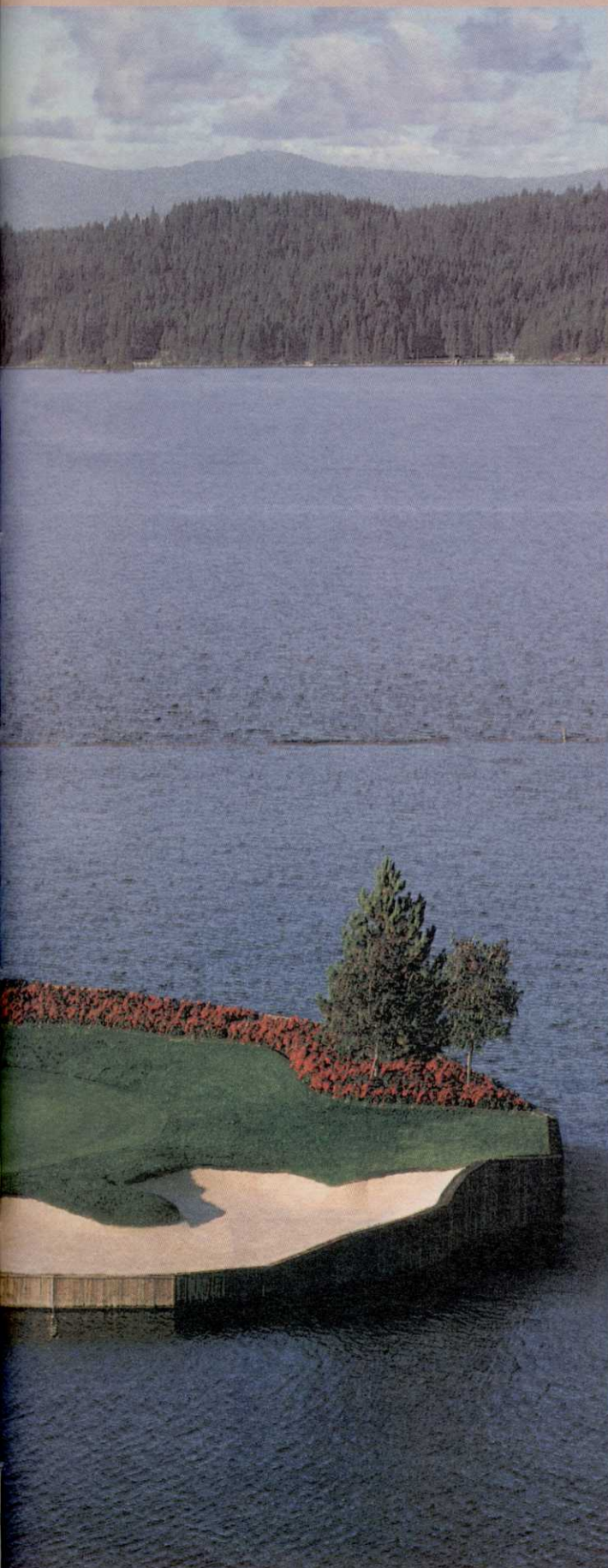
"You do the work first, then, when the golfers are happy with it, you increase the rates," said Roberts of American Golf. "If the work is good, people will still see it as a value."

Like Hirsh, Roberts sees course conditioning — and especially turf quality — as the number-one foundation for any upscaling.

"You must have a consistent, quality playing surface: greens, fairways, tees, rough, bunkers," said Roberts.

Roberts estimated that American Golf has done about 12 upscaling projects in the past four to five years. He said the cost has ranged from \$250,000 to more than \$1 million.

"It's very, very costly to maintain a course and there aren't a lot of entities that have money available to make substantial upgrades," he said. "Most of the time there's barely enough money to keep it from deteriorating. But once it starts to slip it can get away from you and the golfers realize it, they'll go somewhere else."



14th green, The Coeur d'Alene Resort Golf Course, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

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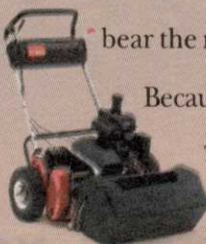
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