

By FRANK J. DiNENNA

Jamaican Postcard

Paradise? Yes. Construction cakewalk? No, no, no!

One may think that golf course construction has a basic concept: Read the specifications, do a materials take-off of the plans, walk over the site, bring in key personnel and equipment, purchase materials, hire and train local labor. Anticipating any problems, in one to two years — depending on the geographic location — you should have built another championship golf course. This concept seems to work in most countries around the world, but not in Jamaica. Jamaicans build golf courses the old-fashioned way: by hand and with very little money.

I took on a project in Port Antonio, Jamaica, called San San Golf Club. A very easy project — building 12 U.S. Golf Association-spec greens and 18 sets of tees with a basic manual irrigation system. Construction began in October 1994, after waiting six months for equipment and materials to come on site. Once the equipment arrived, we had to replace all of the hydraulic hoses, tubes and water lines due to rot and corrosion because of the long stay on the docks.

Construction went slowly until January 1995, when the owner finally hired a full crew. But in April 1995, we had a strike due to low wages. Two months later, the owner hired a new

crew from another part of the island. This crew was very slow. The first crew, which I had trained, could finish a 10,000-square-foot drain tile installation in a green in less than a week. (Yes, I know your team could do it in a day). The new crew took more than a month. To add insult to injury, this crew was stealing everything they could: tools, parts, gas, oil, batteries. If it could be picked up, it was gone.

Eighteen months later, I sit in my clubhouse chair, looking down on half-completed greens (drain tile and gravel only), roughed-in tees, no irrigation materials, and no tools or parts to fix broken-down equipment. This project should have been completed within four to six months. Besides the problems with the crew, equipment, parts and materials containers sitting on the docks in Kingston, I was dealing with an owner who was in no hurry whatsoever to file the proper papers to clear goods through customs or replace the crew. Although he paid my monthly invoices, he was content with the progress: building and maintaining by

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hand and spending little to no money.

Readers may wonder what I am complaining about, sitting here and getting paid. It's an American dream come true!

In reality, one's mind may turn to mush playing the waiting game. I found myself lost in fantasy looking at

pictures of beautifully manicured greens in golf magazines.

Since I came to Jamaica to build San San, I've found other things to fill my idle time. In July 1995, I was hired as building consultant to oversee construction of a nine-hole executive golf course at Braco Village Resort, a hotel on the north coast, east of Montego Bay. Construction was completed by June 1996 (take note, 11 months). I also consult for two other courses — Caymanas in Kingston and Negril Hills (Negril Hills took more than 2-1/2 years to open its 18 holes), and I've joined the Jamaican Greens Superintendents Association.

My advice to any builder planning to venture into Jamaica hoping to find gold is: Do your homework. To build in

Jamaica takes a lot of planning, research and patience. There is an element of surprise that could cost your company a lot of money in the long run. To begin with, the contractor should send their project manager to the site two months before start of construction.

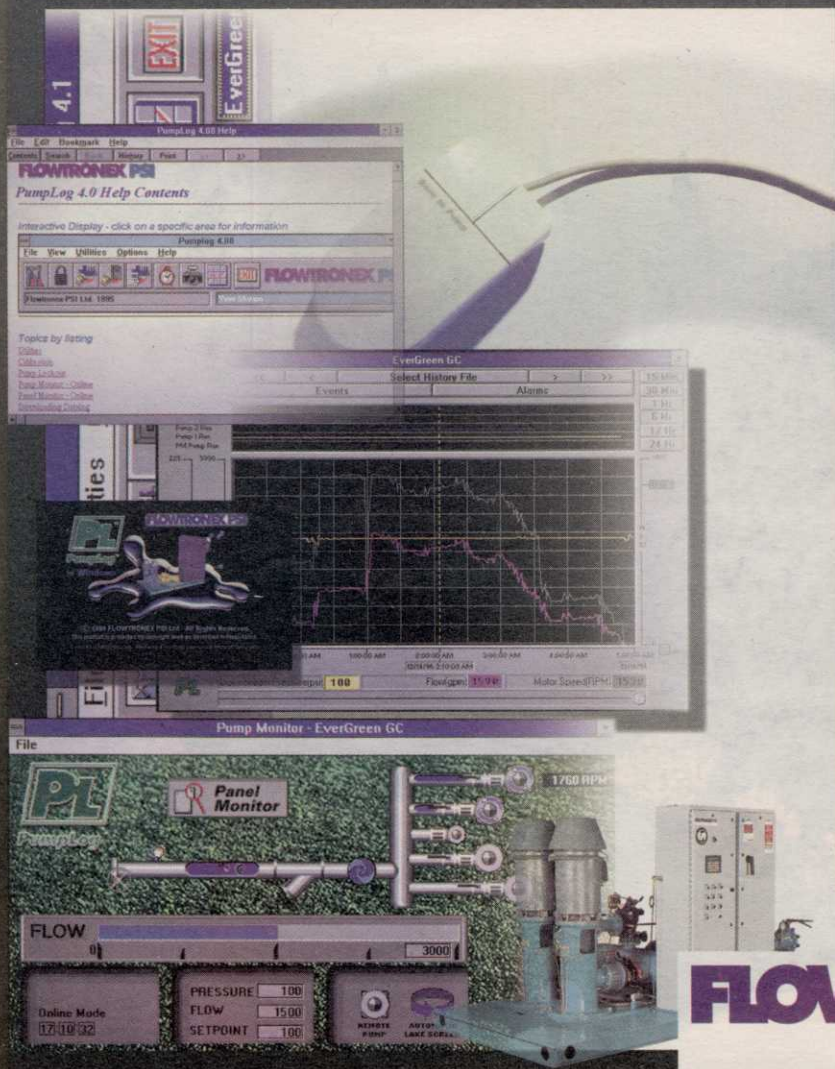
This person will need a work permit, an enclosed four-wheel-drive vehicle (a good used one can be obtained in Jamaica), and a 3-watt cellular phone. He should get familiar with the bureaucratic system, find a good lawyer and customs broker, locate vendors and subcontractors, get acquainted with the locals, find housing, hire a good security service (a must) and learn how to drive Jamaican style (on the left).

Next he will import about 90 percent of the materials needed to build the course; tools, irrigation components, used construction equipment, four-wheel drive field trucks, a good service truck, fertilizer, turf, and a lot of spare parts. He may even have to import sand for greens and traps. I want to emphasize the spare parts, especially the hard-to-find items. When a piece of equipment breaks down and you don't have a spare part, do not depend on any express couriers to deliver to your doorstep the next day. Federal Express will get your package to Jamaica the next day, but then it will be held at customs until you can get it cleared, and that may take up to two weeks. If you are in a hurry, have one of your personnel fly in carrying the item needed in his bag.

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Frank DiNenna runs a project management service called Golf Management. He has lived and worked in Jamaica for the past two years, consulting and managing golf course construction.

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DiNenna comment

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Once your manager is in place, start shipping. It will take six to eight weeks to clear shipments off the dock, providing all paperwork is in order. Once materials and equipment are in place, send your key personnel (supervisors, shapers, etc.). Be very selective with your personnel. Do not send people with bad habits or no patience. They will lose it very quickly, and may even start a worker's strike.

How you deal with the local labor is a key element to your

success in Jamaica. The best way is to hire a local foreman with good references. Let this person give the instructions and hand out the disciplinary action to the locals. Never discipline a local. Most of all, never discipline your foreman in front of the crew.

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When hiring local subcontractors to move your fill, haul material, rent their equipment,

etc., thoroughly check the references. You will find the contractor will show up with his fleet of trucks, loaders and labor the first day, raring to go. This will give your project manager a false feeling that he will finish this course in record time. But, as time moves on, these subcontractors will start to pull equipment and laborers off the site to work on new contracts. This will be done over a period of time. At first the contractor will say he needs a truck or two to do a little job down the road. Within weeks to a month, your fleet of, say, 10 dumptrucks is down

to two, and the loader is moving back and forth every other day to every other week.

The key here is to offer bid contracts only. The contractors will insist on weekly payments based on a daily invoice. This is where you will need a reliable man to check their progress and materials in place. In Jamaica, there are no scales to weigh loads. You're going to have to measure every truck's bed and insist on a truck number for identification. Never give a contractor money up front. Hold back more than 10 percent — perhaps 20 to 25 percent. In

the end you will need this money to hire another subcontractor to finish the job.

By the way, the contractor will use this tactic of moving equipment around to try to confuse the manager. The manager should appoint one of his key personnel (not a local) to count loads and the movement of trucks in and out. This should be done first thing in the morning, then at 10 a.m., again at 1 and 3 p.m., and at quitting time. If you think this is being obsessive, wait until you get your invoice.

When I said, "Do not use a local to count loads and trucks," it's because the contractor will make a deal with the local to write down false numbers. Later, the contractor will give this man his cut of the action. You will find the same thing will happen with local laborers. They will work hard at first, then as the project comes close to being finished, they will start to taper off, prolonging the ending. They feel once the project is completed, their job will end, so they will drag it out.

Stealing is a major problem in Jamaica. Even with the best security system in place, items disappear right from under your nose. If the people like you, they will respect your personal things. Since I've been in Jamaica, I have not lost any of my personal items or money. I once dropped a \$500 Jamaican (\$12.50 US) in the field, and one of the men found it and returned to me. This assured me of never having any problems.

On the other hand, stealing at San San is like another job. If it is not welded down or concreted into the ground, it will disappear. It's easy to understand why there is rampant theft on the island. The standard weekly paycheck for a laborer with few skills is \$1,000 to \$1,200 Jamaican dollars per week (\$25 to \$30 US). I find it very hard to live on \$100 US per week, and my overhead is very small. On most projects, the crew is housed in camps, and fed twice a day. A contractor can find a good labor crew for \$1,500 Jamaican dollars per week (\$40 US), operators and foremen for \$4,000 Jamaican dollars per week (\$100 US). Keep in mind, when it comes to your Jamaican crew, be fair and treat them with respect. They will respect you and work hard on your project.

In the end, you will toast to a job well done. And as you look out your office window at the finished project, you will remember your construction calendar framed on the wall. It will seem like another lifetime.

The island of Jamaica is a beautiful country and the people are very friendly. One could live a blissful life in this tranquil paradise, provided he does not build golf courses.



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