

By MICHAEL HURDZAN

Builders are the heroes of projects

There is a tendency for people to attempt to isolate the one person who seems the most responsible for something of note. Perhaps it is because we wish to have a solitary figure to focus on, for admittedly, it is much easier to praise a general than all the soldiers of his army, a conductor instead of the orchestra, or the quarterback instead of the team. Although we

know better, we sometimes forget that the person being singled out is tall only because he stands on the shoulders of people who helped him or her achieve their distinction. The world is filled with such unacknowledged people, whether it be the families who make personal sacrifices to permit our hero or hero-

ine to rise, or the friends, associates, or subordinates who directly assist the effort. In the field of golf course development, there is a tendency to focus on the architect instead of the unsung artist, namely the golf course contractor.

In fact, the terms "contractor" or "builder" do not do these men

and women justice, for they are artisans in the strictest sense. Their tools may be bulldozers, earthmovers and tractors, but their medium is the earth and the best of these craftsman can mold the landscape to produce earth sculptures we call tees, greens, mounds and bunkers. They understand the subtleties

of nature, landforms and natural processes, and strive to blend the necessary artificiality of golf features imperceptibly into the surrounding environment.

In addition, these people know that fine turf must be grown and maintained on the soils and slopes they leave, so much attention is given to agronomic matters such as topsoil, drainage, seedbeds, fertilizers and seed or stolons.

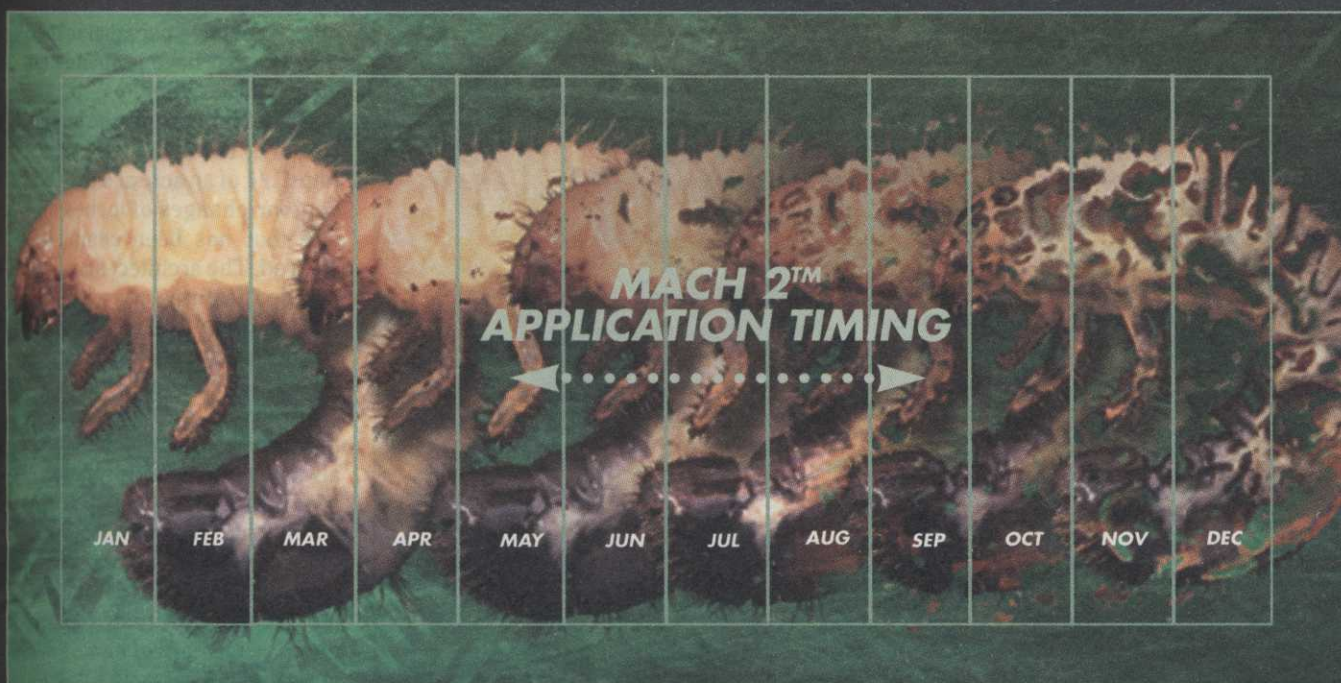
They work against unpredictable weather, unforeseen geological features, and competing weeds and animals to meet an unforgiving ideal planting time. Besides their natural opponents, there are delays caused by humans such as unresponsive suppliers, vandalism, or strikes by other trades or unions.

Their equipment and crews are specialized for golf course construction and thus can achieve a naturalness of contours that is uncharacteristic of road and/or sewer contractors.

The convention is to call these artisans "contractors," and so I shall, but in your mind there should be a clear distinction between contractors and golf course builders. Actually, a better name is "builders." Their

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Turf Drain cited

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South Lyon, Mich.

"Actually, they finished under budget on our course," said Ron Foote, superintendent at Michigan State University. "That enabled us to make more improvements on other sections of the course."

"Turf Drain is quality, quick, clean, courteous, and professional with owner and architect relationships," added course architect Bruce Matthews III, whose Design 3, Inc., of East Lansing has worked on five projects with the contractor.

"We're unique. What we do and all we've ever done is golf course remodeling," Corlett said. "Mostly they are private clubs, usually between 70 and 100 years old."

Key to Corlett's plans is maintaining control of growth. The firm did 48 projects in 1995, 56 in 1996 and 60 in 1997. "We're endeavoring to reduce that number but do larger projects," he said. "That will control growth. Once we hit a 20-percent increase, we stop."

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Hurdzan on builders

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national organization, the Golf Course Builders Association of America (GCBA), has greatly contributed to the growth of golf and is celebrating its 25th anniversary.

Having established what they are, we should examine who they are and what they do to earn the

title of hero. Not many firms in the world do only golf course construction. One reason is because the scope of the work is so varied and complex that few companies can organize, equip and train people to handle the work. Not only must the golf course builder be an expert in construction, he must be an astute busi-

ness person to comply with all of the legalities attendant to construction.

Although more courses are being built than 10 years ago, the competition during bidding can be fierce, requiring small profit margins. Once selected, the builder must execute all this work in a tight timeframe, hoping that delays and forced overtime wages will not eat up all the profit. Most contractors find

such bidding and working conditions intolerable and thus they do not enter golf course construction, or they last a very short time.

Further, since golf course projects are so scattered it means that these men and women must be apart from their families for long periods, or develop an almost nomadic family experience.

The obvious question is, why do they persist in golf course

construction? The answer is that these people are true artisans who find reward and take pride in the work they do. To remain in this business and produce high-quality golf courses requires that a builder put a bit of himself or herself into every roll, every mound, every green, every feature. They are creating as they construct and they feel good about each day's work.

But if golf course construction is so creative, what is the function of the golf course architect? The architect plans at a macro-scale and is concerned with about 150 or 200 acres or more at a contour interval of perhaps one or 2 feet. The architect must plan the relationship or elements on a site that may not allow intensive personal inspection, or that have problems not clearly discernible.

On the other hand, the builder works at the microscale of perhaps 1/4 of an acre at a time and contour changes of inches on a site that has been completely cleared. The architect may draw detailed features at a scale of 1 inch equals 10 feet, but the builder must construct that feature at 1 inch equals 1 inch.

No matter how sophisticated the plans are drawn, there must always be field interpretation of those drawings; and it is this ability that separates the great builders from the wannabes. This ability is learned from technical training, repeated experiences, and years of honest constructive criticism. But it is not solely of intellect, for the great contractor has a superb imagination, reliable intuition and good eye-to-hand coordination.

Any dummy can be taught to run a bulldozer, but a precious few can develop the skill to shape an awesome green complex.

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No architect would disagree with me when I say that a great builder can make your work look outstandingly good, and a poor contractor can butcher the greatest design in the world. Some builders have taken bad golf course plans and made enough field adjustments to fashion a good golf course, only to have the designer get all the credit.

These are good times for golf course builders, for many courses are being built. However, not so long ago when the country was facing high inflation, the interest rates and rising wages made it difficult to make a profit, or even stay in business. This affected every golfer who appreciates a fine golf course. Each time we lost one of these artisans, the evolution of course design was set back for we lost the subtleties of interpretation so necessary to produce a great golf course.



An analogy would be if a gifted composer wrote an imaginative and inspired piece of music, but if the only musicians around to play it were a street corner band, you can imagine the result. This is humorous perhaps, but the same results might be expected if you gave a terrific golf course plan to a road builder.

Thank goodness our country's economy has improved and golf course building is at an all-time high rate. Now the problem is trying to find contractors or train crews in the subtleties of course construction. Provided the industry is successful, which it seems to be, the best golf courses ever are yet to come. Better designs and better construction, supported by better maintenance, guarantee great golf.

Now, I am not so naive as to think that human nature will change and we will acknowledge all of our unsung heroes. But next time you are impressed by a great golf course, don't just think of the designer. Remember the golf course builder.

UK lottery

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struggle to justify expenditure on golf course construction.

Once more, the perceived image of golf is causing problems. "Golf has the wrong image, it is seen as being exclusive, elitist and discriminatory. If we are to provide for a wider base of golfers we must overcome this," said the BIGCA spokesperson.

Another way forward is for existing private clubs to open it's doors to the general

public on a pay as you play basis with no discrimination against non-members.

Prime Minister Tony Blair made clear before the general election in May that he wanted the lottery to be run in the spirit of public good.

If golf is able to evolve into a truly "people's game" then convergence with the Lottery Funds would be all the more likely. At the moment, however, an awful lot of people would like the opportunity to play golf but the funds are not forthcoming to allow them to do so.

MacCurrach honored

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GCSAA Foundation, is open to undergraduate turf students. Each applicant is judged on academic excellence, appropriate career preparation and potential to make an outstanding professional contribution. Applications are distributed in December and January to all colleges and universities that offer degrees in turfgrass management. Applications are also available on the GCSAA Web site (www.gcsaa.org). The application deadline is June 1, with the judging process to be completed by July 15.

Internationally recognized for his expertise in the turf management field, MacCurrach began his career as golf course superintendent at Valley Coun-

try Club in Warwick, R.I., in 1962. In 1972, he became the 45th person to receive the title of Certified Golf Course Superintendent from the GCSAA. MacCurrach became the PGA Tour's first agronomist in 1974, then was named senior agronomist in 1988. In 1994, he received the GCSAA's Distinguished Service Award.

"Allan's contributions to the PGA Tour specifically, and the turfgrass industry in general, were invaluable," PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem said. "As senior agronomist, he played a leading role in establishing the standard of excellence for course conditioning at Tour events. The scholarship is an appropriate way of honoring Allan's years of dedication to the PGA Tour and the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America."

Mastroleo wins Distinguished Service

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manage Fox Hills Golf Course in 1959. Eleven years later, he became superintendent at Hillcrest Country Club, where he has been for nearly 30 years.

"Dave Mastroleo is the epitome of what golf course superintendents are all about," said Bruce R. Williams, certified golf course superintendent at Los Angeles Country Club and GCSAA immediate past president. "He has spent a long career giving and sharing while asking for nothing in return. Dave is a shining example of the spirit of volunteerism, with over 40 years of contributing his time and talents to various GCSAA chapters and allied turfgrass organizations."

Mastroleo has been a GCSAA member since 1954, and is a member and past director and president of both the California Golf Course Superintendents Association (GCSA) and the GCSA of Southern California. He also is past president of the California Turfgrass Council.

"As a mentor, Dave has a long list of successful superintendents who benefited from this tutelage. The respect that those former trainees have for Dave is immeasurable, and many of them pinpoint Dave Mastroleo as the primary factor for their success," Williams said.

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Fream: Golf in Asia

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five return on investment.

Since it takes two years or longer to plan, build and open a golf course, having inventory on stream as the local economy revives and pent-up economic demand expands, puts upward pressure on membership and greens-fee prices.

Daily-fee courses can manage current situations by greens fee adjustments and smart marketing of existing facilities. As player demand expands again, and it surely will, daily-fee operators or semi-private clubs with excess capacity, can attract new players. As demand increases again, there will be upward pressure on greens fees. For the in-place existing operator, this pressure of increased play and higher greens fees will clearly add to the profit margin. Membership values will increase as player demand increases.

Tourism golf will be a beneficiary as the various Asian economies recover. Tourism is here to stay. It is the single largest industry in the world. A couple of years of staying "home for the holiday" will surely rekindle the desire to play elsewhere when the confidence in the income stream and local economy has returned.

Existing resort courses or those now in construction that are open as the tourist demand returns, will benefit.

Since Southeast Asia has many of the world's most attractive seaside-sunshine

locations, tourist arrivals from elsewhere, primarily North America and Europe, will see business now and in the future. There are some bargains at hand where recent currency devaluations have made local prices more attractive. Smartly managed tourist resort courses can see direct benefit from increased international tourist travel.

Regional tourism will also benefit as Japan finally gets their economy back in equilibrium. Traveling Japanese golfers, because they cannot afford to play golf at home, constitute a considerable percentage of the 15 million or so Japanese players and the approximately 5,000 driving ranges that continue to produce more players. In the future, the Japanese golfer will be even more important. Cost factors, politics and environmental issues will prevent Japan from ever again building huge numbers of courses as happened in the 1980's. This means ever more Japanese will be seeking out other locations to play their golf. Korea, Guam, Saipan and the Philippines can be the earliest beneficiaries. China also can accommodate the Japanese golfer conveniently.

The Chinese are observers, not avid participants in the current Chinese golf market. Expatriate and speculative buyers drove much of the recent Chinese market demand. A large number of new courses across China is unlikely due to limited land availability, water availability problems, population pressures and

other economic and political concerns. Chinese travelers will increase in number geometrically in the coming years. Golfers will be among those travelers.

Existing and new courses around the Pacific Basin will benefit from the Japanese and Chinese tourist golfer. Korea and Taiwan can benefit most easily. The Philippines can certainly gain tourism golf visitors from China, Japan, Korea and elsewhere. More tourist quality destinations for eager golfers must be provided, however.

Those who can develop new courses in China in the next few years will clearly benefit, so long as the site selected for the new course is a solid one in a good location with adequate market analysis and with experienced planning and design. Excessive development costs are the last thing a smart golf developer will want. The correct location is vital. Mediocre design and construction results will not be financially successful.

It has become apparent in viewing the overall Asian golf market for more than 25 years, that these recent and ongoing economic readjustments will have considerable benefit, in spite of near-term hardship. The desire to play golf will overcome financial concerns.

Overbuilding of courses using ill-sited locations, grandiose design schemes and

eccentric clubhouse goals, will cause bankruptcy and distress for some. Overly expensive courses built more at the whim and ego of a signature player, or optimistic owner, rather than clearly focused on financial reality, will decline.

If future golf courses are master planned and designed in logical locations, with a clear understanding of the specific market target, with reasonable construction costs, with modest, yet comfortable, functional clubhouse facilities, golf

can be offered that will accommodate the vast majority of present and future players.

It must be recognized that Asia is diverse in very many ways. The effects of the current economic turmoil will impact each country differently while the timing of the impact, the duration of the downturn as well as the severity, will vary and may rotate. The emergence from adjustment and correction actions will surely vary. Politics and strength of conviction on the part of the various national leaders will have direct bearing on the timing and rate of recovery.

The ongoing dip in golf play and golf development activity will be viewed in the new millennium as but a pothole in an otherwise profitable and expanding industry. There will be more than 60 million golfers around the world by 2001. That is a major market to target.

