

## Shark, Fireman team on Puerto Rican beach resort

By HAL PHILLIPS

**R**IO GRANDE, Puerto Rico — Reebok Chairman Paul Fireman and Greg Norman have been friends and associates since 1991, when the Australian touring professional signed a "lifetime" deal to endorse the firm's footwear and apparel. Reebok responded two years later by creating a separate business unit, Greg Norman Apparel Co., whose mission it remains to accredit the Norman logo to prospective licensees worldwide.

This unique partnership has further diversified, with Fireman and The Shark officially christening the Norman-designed River Course here at the Westin Rio Mar Beach Resort & Country Club.

The \$5.9 million track, which opened for limited play in July 1997, is the latest collaboration between Norman and Fireman who got into the golf business back in 1991 when he bought a struggling Cape Cod golf community for \$9.1 million at foreclosure auction.

After sinking \$25 million of his own money into the project and forming Willowbend Development Corp. (WDC) to manage its growth, Fireman has watched Willowbend Country Club in Mashpee, Mass. quickly reach full membership and sell 91 of its 287 real estate units at more than \$198,000 per lot and \$390,000 per home.

These are colossal numbers in the golf industry but something of a pittance for the chairman of Reebok International, which did an estimated \$3.7 billion in revenues last year.

Indeed, some golf industry observers viewed Fireman's Willowbend project as "dabbling," while others — including one of Reebok's institutional shareholders — called it "foolishness."

While shareholders have a financial right to skepticism, the "dabbling" charge looks increasingly ill considered. WDC not only developed the Norman-designed River Course, it spearheaded the \$178 million The Westin Rio Mar Beach Resort and Country Club, working with the experienced hospitality developers, Tishman Realty & Construction Co. of Manhattan.

Opened in August 1996, The Westin Rio Mar offers 600 rooms, beach frontage, a casino and 36 holes of golf — the Ocean Course, designed by George and Tom Fazio, has been in play since 1974. Come 1999, another hotel developed by Willowbend — this one with 270 rooms and costing \$57 million — should be up and running.

Across the island, WDC is also building an 18-hole, Chi Chi Rodriguez-designed course at Dorado Del Mar, a resort complex developed by the Puerto Rican firm, Empresas Sandurni Corp.

Meanwhile, with completion of the River Course — which followed hard on last year's debut of the TPC at Sugarloaf — Greg Norman Design now has two solo designs operational in North America.

His firm has completed nine project worldwide while 29 remain in construction, 11 in the United States.

And lest we forget, The Greg Norman Collection — the dedicated apparel divi-

sion licensed by Reebok but administered by Great White Shark Enterprises — is now the fourth-best selling men's clothing line in America's top-tiered department stores, trailing only Polo, Tommy Hilfiger and Nautica.

Let's see the chairman of another athletic shoe company and his Cablinasian spokesman try something like that.

"I knew that when we got involved with the hotel possibility and knew we wanted to put a new course in, of course the first

person I called was Greg," Fireman told Golf Course News. "His company came in and did a great job. The finished product is spectacular."

Named for the Mamayas River which bisects the property and comes into play on five holes, the River Course was not

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*Greg Norman, left, and Reebok International Chairman Paul Fireman at The River Course in Rio Grande, Puerto Rico.*



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# Shenzhen to be completely remodeled by Nelson & Haworth

Shenzhen Golf Club, home to two of the top tournaments on the Volvo China Tour — the Volvo Open and the Hugo Boss Open — is to be given a complete remodeling by Nelson & Haworth. The course, the first to open in Shenzhen in the mid-1980's, is a favorite venue for many tournaments and visitors,

due to its proximity to Hong Kong and its well respected club management.

Nelson & Haworth will be upgrading all 27 holes. Singapore — based managing director Neil Haworth revealed that significant improvements will be made to the greens, tees, and fairways. "We will be bringing the whole

course up to modern standards," he explained, "including rebuilding the irrigation and drainage systems and enhancing the landscaping. We expect the whole project to take about 24 months to complete," he said.

"The greens will be rebuilt to USGA standards, using Tifdwarf grass, to give more character and

interest to the putting surface," Haworth detailed, "and bunkers will be added or existing ones re-shaped to add to the visibility and playing strategy required. We will also be re-shaping the fairways to ensure the positive surface flow of water, and adding sand, catch basins and pipes to improve the drainage. There will

also be a new fully computerized automatic irrigation system installed. Furthermore, we'll be adding additional water hazards for both aesthetics and playability."

The company said that regular players at the course need not be inconvenienced as work will be done nine holes at a time, so 18 holes will always be open.

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## Norman, Fireman in Puerto Rico

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the easiest of construction projects.

Jason McCoy, vice president at Greg Norman Design, visited Puerto Rico some 40 separate times to deal with construction problems, foremost among them a hurricane that hit just as seeding had been completed. Three months were lost.

"Whether you do it for a friend or because it's strictly business, your name's going on it — that's why you spend the time down here to make sure it comes off," Norman told *Golf Course News* the morning of December's grand opening.

"Like any project, you're going to have problems. Mother Nature comes in and throws a couple of hurricanes at you; she dumps a bunch of rain on you during construction, and so on. But at the end of the day, if you dedicate yourself to a project, your end result will be exactly what you want."

Norman's River design is a commendable resort design: Bearish from the back tees (6,931 yards) but quite playable from the front (6,250).

The river and its collateral wetlands are clearly the dominant features, beautifully tinged with splashes of brilliant orange (flamboyant trees) and violet (reine del floral).

Fireman and Norman agree the River Course was a special situation; not all of their future golf projects will be developed in such close concert.

Indeed, Norman doesn't necessarily rely on Fireman for work; his design plate is full.

By the same token, with two bonified successes in his deep pockets — Fireman's personal real estate portfolio reportedly approaches \$300 million — the Reebok chairman is unlikely to stand pat.

He was asked if WDC had any course development plans on the U.S. mainland. Fireman smiled but remained non-committal: "We're reviewing a few."