

Point/Counterpoint: \$1 million versus \$10 million golf courses

POINT • DR. MICHAEL HURDZAN:

Dana, I want you to listen to why it is important to build cost-effective golf courses. We need to build low-cost golf courses and these are the reasons why:

First, why do people play the game of golf? The reason they play is not necessarily because of celebrities, or tournaments, or magazines. The reasons have more to do with the spiritual refreshment, the ethereal surroundings, the intrinsic pleasure, mental relaxation and the elusive pursuit of a game.

To find the answer to that question, we need to look at a definition written by David R. Forgan:

"Golf is a science, the study of a lifetime, in which you may exhaust yourself but never your subject. It is a contest, a dual, or a melee calling for courage, skill, strategy and self-control. It is a test of temper, a trial of honor, a revealer of character. It affords the chance to play the man, and act the gentleman. It means going into God's out-of-doors, getting close to nature, fresh air, exercise, a sweeping away of mental cobwebs, genuine recreation of the tired tissues. It is a cure for care, an antidote to worry. It includes companionship with friends, social intercourse, opportunity for courtesy, kindness and generosity to an opponent. It promotes not only physical health but moral force."

The reason I bring that up is because it says the most important part of golf is the spirit of the game, the idea of being out with your friends and being able to play the game. And, although I grant you that the prettier the surroundings the more pleasurable the experience, it isn't absolutely necessary. The most important thing is being out with your friends and being able to enjoy the game.

Nowhere in this definition does it say anything about Stimpmeters, slope ratings, golf cars, top 100 courses, or Tiger Woods. It doesn't say golf must be played on fast greens, groomed fairways and roughs, or have manicured hazards. It doesn't even say golf must be played on green grass.

If we could arrange golf courses into a pyramid based on quality, at the very top

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They share an office, but not opinions: Michael Hurdzan (far left), Dana Fry (far right). Looking on are PGA Tour Pro John Cook and his sister, Cathy.

COUNTERPOINT • DANA FRY:

If a \$1 million golf course is so great, how come all the slides you show are of \$5 million and \$10 million golf courses?

There is a golf course in South Africa, obviously built by locals, that fits all the criteria of a Mike Hurdzan golf course. Number one, it's cheap. It beats Mike's budget by several hundred thousand dollars. Number two, it has dry and fast playing conditions. Number three, and this is very important if you know Mike: There are no USGA greens. Number four, it is a buzz word for Mike: It is environmentally friendly.

Seriously, although I agree with what you are saying, I don't know if it is possible to build a course for \$1 million. Because of the constraints — either physically, by the land, or by outside agencies — often it is impossible to do that.

Often on the projects we work on, we spend \$1 million on earthwork, \$1 million on irrigation, \$1 million on sod, and perhaps another \$1 million on landscaping.

I've often heard you say that what makes golf special is the environment it's played in. Most people would rather play on lush, green, visually exciting golf courses instead of a military parade field. You said yourself, there is nothing special about a million-dollar golf course.

Golf course architecture is an art form. The more beautiful the golf course, the more spiritually refreshing it becomes, and people are willing to pay for that experience.

Sometimes golf courses can be placed on such great sites that a reasonable-cost golf course can be built there and you'll find it at the top of your pyramid. Sites such as Cypress Point, Shinnecock Hills, or the Sand Hills are examples.

However, in the absence of such great topography, soil conditions and wonderful off-site views, golf courses must be made beautiful through construction and maintenance. And that takes big bucks. Let me show you what I mean.

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Point/Hurdzan

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of the pyramid we would put high-cost, expensive, very exclusive golf courses. Down on the bottom we would place basic, low-cost, effective beginner-type golf courses.

You would see those courses at the very top, the exclusive ones that cost a lot of money,

depend on a good base. We have to have a good foundation, and when the foundation starts to crumble and break down, the top will suffer as well. The better the base, the higher the top will rise. And so, the bottom of the foundation is what we really need to be concerned about.

The future health of golf depends upon three words: affordable, accessible and sustainable.

Affordable means keeping golf so that the average person can go out and enjoy the game. It means having golf competitively priced with going out to the movie theater, or going to a family restaurant, or being able to go to the course once or twice a week or once or twice a month.

Accessible means having golf as close to the city as possible, so that children can get there on

bike or public transportation. Having the golf course at a friendly place where people don't need to worry about wearing

Bobby Jones shirts or Footjoy shoes. But, rather, it's a place where you can go and just get comfortable and enjoy the pleasures of the game.

Sustainable means putting a golf course into the environment that needs the least amount of input possible to produce an interesting round of golf: the least amount of water, fertilizer, pesticide and fossil fuels. The fewer those inputs, the more sustainable that golf course is going to be.

A \$1 million golf course accomplishes all three of those goals. There is a rule of thumb that for every million dollars invested in a golf course, we need a \$8 to \$10 greens fee to recover that cost. If we build a \$3 million course, greens fees might be \$24 to \$30. If you add in the cost of a modest clubhouse, maintenance building and maintenance equipment, you might be able to sell a round of golf for \$8 to \$15 for every \$1 million invested.

The most important factor is the site. If you have a good site you can build an inexpensive golf course. What would a \$1 million golf course look like?

I would suspect that we could take Pinehurst #2 and duplicate it for \$1 million. And so also with Sand Hills in Nebraska, and even a little place called Pine Valley. Granted, it wouldn't have much of an irrigation system. But if we have a good natural site, we can put a golf course on it, and that golf course can become a very pleasurable place for a relatively low investment.

The key is a well-drained, gently rolling site with few environmental limitations is essential to making a \$1 million 18-hole golf course.

So, what if we don't have a good site and we have only \$1 million? Nothing says we have to build a par-72, 7,000-yard course. We can build a nine-hole course, or an executive course, or a learning center with some practice holes.

Each of those is important to that pyramid of golf. Each of those supports the base that we're concerned about.

Granted, a \$1 million golf course will never be a place that will hold the U.S. Open. Granted, it won't make much of a reputation for me and you. Certainly, it will never make the Top 75 list. But, overall it is good for golf. It is the right thing to do for the game.

In closing, I'd like to ask you which is better for golf: ten \$1 million golf courses charging a \$15 greens fee, or one \$15 million course charging a \$150 greens fee?

'I would suspect that we could take Pinehurst #2 and duplicate it for \$1 million. And so also with Sand Hills in Nebraska, and even a little place called Pine Valley.'

—Michael Hurdzan

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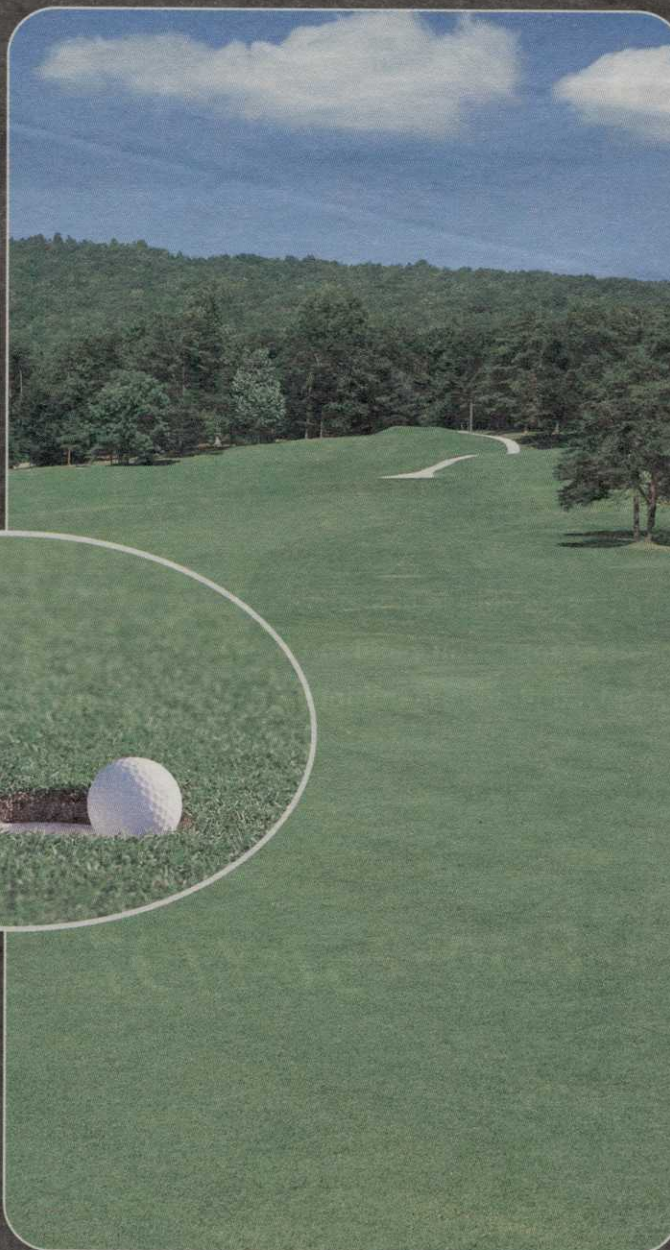
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Counterpoint/Fry

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On a project in Vancouver, British Columbia, we had enormous amounts of huge rocks. How do you cheaply remove them? If there are horrible soil conditions, it costs a lot to make a final product that looks good — not \$1 million.

The other thing that's required to build golf courses on difficult

sites is lots of drainage and irrigation. We put in miles and miles of irrigation on the Vancouver course, and in many instances we spend more than \$1 million on irrigation alone, and several hundred thousand on drainage.

The Vancouver project had a 175-foot drop on the tee shot. To make the fairway somewhat playable we had to build a 10-meter-high retaining wall. The wall it-

self was unbelievably difficult to build. We had lots of bridges crossing severe slopes to get from one point to the other. On the same project, with 700 feet of elevation change, we couldn't even get trucks to the site. We had to get the sand for traps hauled by helicopter.

The first hole at Devil's Pulpit in Toronto — the first course I ever worked with you on, Mike

'I don't know if \$1 million courses are possible, but affordable ones are important. And we must continue to build our special places — although they might cost \$10 million or more.'

—Dana Fry

— the very first issue of *Golf Course News*, I'll never forget it: February 1989, had just come out and Mike Hurdzan was

quoted in the lead article saying, "You can build a golf course for \$1 million." Well, this one hole at Devil's Pulpit cost \$1 million.

On another property, Desert Willow in Palm Desert, Calif., the site literally had no features whatsoever. We spent about \$10.5 million — of which \$1.5 million was in earthwork, \$2 million in irrigation, and \$3.2 million in landscaping.

Mike, I agree with what you're saying. But there are several conditions we must keep. On the pyramid of golf courses, it's much more fun to work on those at the top, and that is where most people struggle to be all of their lives. And, playing one of those courses is a life's goal for some people.

So, I say it is inherently important to continue to construct the low-cost golf courses. I don't know if \$1 million courses are possible, but affordable ones are important. And we must continue to build our special places — although they might cost \$10 million or more. Most of us learn to play golf on affordable courses, but we aspire to play and enjoy all the richness that a golf course can give.

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