

Lohmann: Alternative-facility development is good business — your business

By BOB LOHMANN

Serving as president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA) is a bit like visiting the observation deck atop a skyscraper: You can't miss the big picture, but your best thinking invariably follows the long elevator-aided descent, when both feet are planted firmly on the ground.

As my term winds down (John LaFoy will succeed me in March), I'm better able to evaluate what we've been able to accomplish over the past 10 months, and what architects can do to strengthen golf in the coming years.

The dominant topic has been "growth." Everyone in our business talks about growing and invigorating golf by making its courses and the game itself more accessible to youngsters. But what should architects do with their influence? We can work in concert with allied organizations, but how can golf course designers

Bob Lohmann is president of Lohmann Golf Designs and its sister construction division, Golf Creations; both are based in Marengo, Ill. Lohmann is sitting president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects; his term expires in March.

help attract young people into the game and keep them there?

After all, we can lay out learning centers, short courses and practice holes, but developers and municipalities — our clients — ultimately make the decision whether to build these alternative facilities.

Here's the crux of the issue: When it comes to creating facilities that attract and serve junior golfers, it's the chicken or the egg. Which comes first? Does the developer approach the architect and say, "You know, I'd like to have a 3-hole short course in addition to the 18 you're designing."

Or is it the responsibility of the course designer to say, "You know, if we use this routing plan, we'll have room to include a 3-hole short course, as well."

When I took office last year, I called on my colleagues to put their money where their mouths are. Last April in Los Angeles, I told my colleagues that it's *our* job as golf course architects to make sure developers and municipalities, our clients, understand the value of creating these alternative facilities, which allow juniors and novices the opportunity to learn the game in fun, low-key environments.



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We have a dual role: designer and advocate. With influence comes responsibility; this is part of our responsibility.

Well, I'm happy to report this message is taking hold — not because it was my idea or because ASGCA members do whatever the president says, but because it's good business. If provided a comfortable learning environment, new golfers are more likely to become habitual, green-fee-paying golfers.

Today's youth are nothing if not brand loyal; they will play where they're comfortable, where they learned the game. Further, if a facility provides a place for kids to learn, parents will certainly be predisposed to play there.

ASGCA Associate Member Tom McBroom had made these realities clear to at least one his clients. Tom is in the process of renovating the Algonquin Golf Course in St. Andrews, New Brunswick, Canada. The current facility includes a regulation 18-hole course and an executive nine-hole layout. Tom is condensing these 27 holes down to a single 18; with

the extra room, he's adding a state-of-the-art practice facility that will accommodate an expanded teaching program.

In the stand-alone category, Ault, Clark and Associates have long been in the forefront of this phenomenon. According to partner Tom Clark, the firm has designed 15-20 dedicated practice facilities during the last five years; half a dozen have been built, including Fair Oaks Golf Park in Fairfax with its putting green, chipping area, and 9-hole chip-and-putt.

After seeing the success of Fair Oaks and another Ault, Clark facility — Hunter Mill Golf Park, located on the access road to Dulles International Airport — the Fairfax County Parks Authority developed yet another, Oakmarr Golf Complex in Oakton. Ault, Clark's two 27-hole practice facilities in Myrtle Beach — the night-lit Cane Patch and Midway learning centers — each do 1,500 rounds a day and out-earn their sister regulation courses.

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The success of these practice facilities, stand-alone and those attached to daily-fees, has begun to affect the private club mindset. Over the past 18 months, my firm has renovated and significantly upgraded practice facilities at nine separate private clubs in five states.

Academies and learning cen-

ters won't solve golf's access problems, of course. Many challenges remain before us. In the coming years golf needs to remain sensitive to supply and demand.

The industry must proceed carefully when developing upscale public courses, for instance. A course must fit the needs of its community; I'm troubled by the glut of posh "country clubs for a day" and the

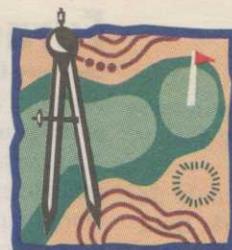
dwindling number of newly developed, affordable daily-fees.

Before a project breaks ground, golf course developers must pay closer attention to demographics: How many golfers live in this area? How often do they play? How much are they willing to pay? It's a disservice to build yet another upscale course in an community crying out for affordable golf.

And not everything in this

world relates to the big picture. I'm proud of several specific ASGCA projects we've been able to complete during my term:

- The First Tee Program: Here's another worthy effort to increase access. I'm proud to say ASGCA was one of the first organizations to lend its full support.



- An Environmental Approach to Golf Course Development: An updated version of this landmark piece, first introduced in 1992, was published earlier this month. We continue to trumpet

golf's environmental credentials, and this effort continues to bear fruit. An official of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recently deemed golf a "model industry in the environmental conscience." He was referring to the positive steps we've taken to design, build and maintain golf courses in concert with nature. This is a solid indication that non-golfers are beginning to understand how courses enhance the environment.

- Suppliers Directory: ASGCA's fabled clearinghouse of supplier information — published for years as a big, bulky, binder — has finally been introduced on CD-Rom. This is important for our members because it's simply a better, more efficient way to sort through reference information. The golf industry will also benefit as ASGCA will soon offer the CD-Rom, previously a members-only item, to the entire industry.

Last year, I remember Past President Alice Dye telling me the best was yet to come for golf. At first, I thought she meant my presidency. But then I realized she was referring to, among other things, the numbers: Golf is growing in every area, outpacing all major sports in the United States.

Player participation, once flat, has surged to almost 27 million — growing by 25 percent during the 1990s. Early returns indicate that more than 400 courses opened for play in 1998. The PGA Tour has never been more prosperous. And *College Sports News Daily* recently reported that NCAA golf scholarships are available in more schools than football scholarships — and that "competition for recruits is menacing."

Young people are finding that golf can provide avenues for success that previously existed only for those with professional ability.

Golf is a beautiful game. It's important to take stock and evaluate the statistics, including course development rates, number of rounds played, dollars spent on the sport, tournament attendance, television ratings and other indicators of growth. However, we must not let the number crunching and trend setting blind us from what has kept golf in the hearts of players worldwide — an elegant simplicity and accessible tradition unparalleled in modern sport.

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