

From toxic to First Tee at Providence's new Button Hole project

By KIT BRADSHAW

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Just five years ago it was an ugly rut of earth that looked as though God had kicked his heel into it and walked on. The state of Rhode Island owned this gouged 26 acres and had despaired of using it for anything beautiful or beneficial to the Providence area. Prostitutes stationed themselves in the area at night, and during the day dirt bikes droned up and down the hill that hid years of toxins. A flower cross memorial marked the spot where a girl was raped and murdered.

Today, it's not rutting, it's routing that defines the space. There's order and symmetry and patches of new grass knitting together. Providence residents come to the top of the former pit, look out over the ordered and greening earth and pronounce it "a miracle."

Today, the short golf course and teaching center called Button Hole is rising from this earthen scar, and the man behind it, Ed Mauro, the former president of the Rhode Island Golf Association, says he feels God's hand on the project.

A few years ago, Mauro was at a meeting at the U.S. Golf Association (USGA) and Executive Director David Fay talked to him about creating a short course in Rhode Island. The next day, Mauro and Fay were in Summit, N.J., at Municipal Golf Course, a par-3 of less than a 1,000 yards that is used by young and senior golfers, women, golfers working on their short game. The idea for a short course took hold, and Mauro, the semi-retired CEO of his own company had a new passion. It is a passion shared by many in the country as part of the First Tee concept spearheaded by the World Golf Foundation, with support from golf's high-profile organizations.

"When we came back from New Jersey, I sought out various parcels in the

'We have 25,000 kids within three miles of this place, and I think that the program will be astounding.'

— Ed Mauro

state," Mauro said, "and came across three or four, but they were too far from the city. Then I started calling different Rhode Island departments for surplus land, and found this parcel within three miles of the financial district of Providence, under the state's ownership. As soon as I saw this property, I knew this was where our home was going to be."

The abandoned gravel pit plunges 35 feet below adjacent property. It is perfect for Mauro's vision of a golf course that would be accessible to urban youngsters, seniors, women and others who might not otherwise have a chance to play a friendly course near their homes. In Mauro's vision, this is more than a short golf course and learning center.

"This is not a golf project," he said. "It is a social project. The mission is to mentor the kids who come here, to play golf with a kid, to buy him a hot dog at the end of the round, to listen to him. Seniors, beginners and women golfers are also welcome, but their tee times will not be in conflict with the kids' times."

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The property had several advantages, according to Mauro. It is close to the urban areas of Providence, and it is on the edge of an undisturbed section of Rhode Island on a beautiful river. The bike path of the city's Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project will come next to the property. "You have a \$13-million govern-



The Button Hole course is beautifying an eyesore in Providence, R.I.

ment project, a beautiful bike path, that will come all the way from Providence right by our site, and go around Button Hole. It is the most unusual site for an inner-city golf course in America," Mauro said.

Several details needed to be ironed out, but Mauro was astonished at the cooperation between the public and private sectors to begin the project. The state leased the Button Hole property at \$1 a year. The owners of the adjacent property are leasing a corner of their land to Button Hole for \$1 a year, provided the property remains as a golf course. Others have come forward with expertise, equipment and, most importantly, time.

As the project started to take shape, Mauro organized The Golf Foundation of Rhode Island, a 501c (3) tax-exempt organization entitled to operate the facility under the long-term lease with the state. The members of the foundation are chosen from the Rhode Island Golf Associa-

Reaching out



This package of stories is one of an ongoing series covering initiatives and projects developed to bring new golfers into the game, particularly youths and minorities. People wishing to submit projects for articles should contact the editorial department of *Golf Course News* at P.O. Box 997, Yarmouth, Maine 04096; e-mail: mleslie@golfcoursenews.com

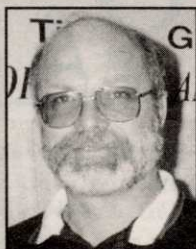
tion, which is spearheading the project, the Rhode Island Women's Golf Association, Ocean State Women's Golf Association, Golf Course Superintendents of Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Professional Golfers Association.

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Friends, businesses catch Mauro's vision

By KIT BRADSHAW

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — If Ed Mauro has one outstanding quality, it is not only the ability to see the vision of a short course and learning center at Button Hole, but to share this vision with others. Mauro doesn't see it as an individual effort, but rather a miraculous coming together of opportunity and people that will eventually create Button Hole on a scarred, abandoned gravel pit here.

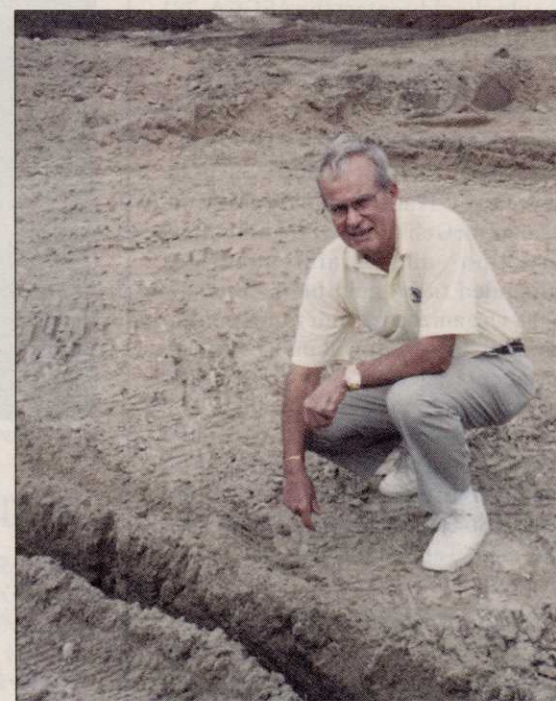
Even though the cost of the enterprise is daunting — \$3.3 million for everything involved — this hasn't stopped Mauro. "We have \$1.6 million in cash and pledges," he said, "and \$700,000 in in-kind contributions. We need another \$900,000 to complete."

Help has come from both in and out of the golf industry. The U.S. Golf Association kicked everything off with a \$50,000 pledge, and then added another \$50,000 from its Foundation Grants program.

"Texttron has given the project cash and equipment for maintenance of the course," Mauro said, "and I estimate their contribution alone is worth between \$250,000 and \$300,000."

Add in the services of Ron Pritchard and P.B. Dye who created the design of the facility — all at no cost.

Then there is the ongoing support of PGA Tour



Button Hole President and founder Ed Mauro on the construction site.

professionals Billy Andrade and Brad Faxon, who are honorary co-chairmen of the Button Hole Fundraising Committee. Andrade has helped as he can from his base in Atlanta, said Mauro, and Faxon is helping on a variety of projects for the course,

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Button Hole 'Providential'

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To kick things off, the USGA Foundation Grants program donated \$50,000, and has since doubled that amount.

The design was created with the cooperation of two golf course architects, Ron Pritchard and P.B. Dye. "I knew Ron Pritchard from the restoration work he did on the club I belong to," Mauro said. "He did the initial layout of the course, and I took this layout to the Dominican Republic, where I visit in the winter. Pete Dye is a friend of mine. I was staying at a home that was next door to the Dye's home there, and I was hoping that Pete or Alice would be there. As it turned out, P.B. Dye [a son] was home, and I asked him to look over the plan. P.B. said that plan was good, but he had some ideas, and he reworked it, getting up at 5 in the morning so he could do the sketches and still catch a plane out. When I showed Ron the routing P.B. had done, he said it looked great and we went with the plan." Mauro added that both golf course architects donated their time.

When Button Hole is completed, it will contain a nine-hole short course, with holes ranging from 73 to 187 yards in length. There will be a full-size driving range, an oversized putting green, clubhouse and a couple of ponds where there will be ice skating in the winter.

The site has been a challenge from the beginning, Mauro said. "There's a big hill on one side of the pit, and underneath the hill was toxic waste, so we couldn't grade down the hill as much as we wanted to do. We graded it as much as we could, and the contractor, Izzo Construction, brought in fill, since we had the hill on one side and the rest was flat as a pancake and we needed a lot of fill to go from zero feet to 20 feet over a stretch of 270 yards."

In addition, Mauro said, some of the greens are in the buffer zone between the property and the Woonasquatucket River, and after a dry spell, the area had a monsoon, which dumped several inches of rainwater into the site.

The result? Dirt from the construction area ran into the nearby wetlands, and the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management halted work in the buffer zone until the situation could be corrected.

But as 1999 drew to a close, there had been progress.

"We've sodded the nine holes," Mauro said, "with the exception of the 1st tee area, which we aren't sodding until we complete the adjacent clubhouse. We decided to sod, rather than seed

the course because we had elected to sod the steep slope of the hill, and it looked so nice that we decided to sod the rest of the course. We had a tremendous cooperation from LIUNA [Labors International Union of America], which not only pledged \$25,000 toward the project, but also offered to provide any labor we needed to sod

DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT

the course. As part of this pledge, members of LIUNA have begun to lay the sod.

"We have only seeded three greens, and the big putting green," Mauro continued. "Some of these greens are in the buffer zone so it deterred us from completing the contouring of these greens, and in other cases, we ran out of time to seed the greens before winter came. However, some work will be done over the winter. We'll be


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— Ed Mauro

completing the driving range, shaping the practice area and building the target greens."

Mauro projected that the driv-

ing range will open in June, and with any luck, the course will be playable by August.

"Since we are continuing to sod the first of April, everything would have to happen right to make this date," he said. "We aren't going to push to get on the golf course if it means we jeopardize the condition of the course. We do anticipate that by the fall you'll be able to play the course, but it will probably be too cold." 

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