

# 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."

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

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](mailto:mleslie@golfcoursenews.com)

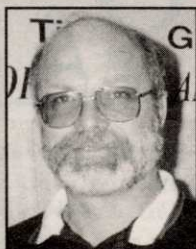
tion, which is spearheading the project, the Rhode Island Women's Golf Association, Ocean State Women's Golf Association, Golf Course Superintendents of Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Professional Golfers Association.

Continued on next page



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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.

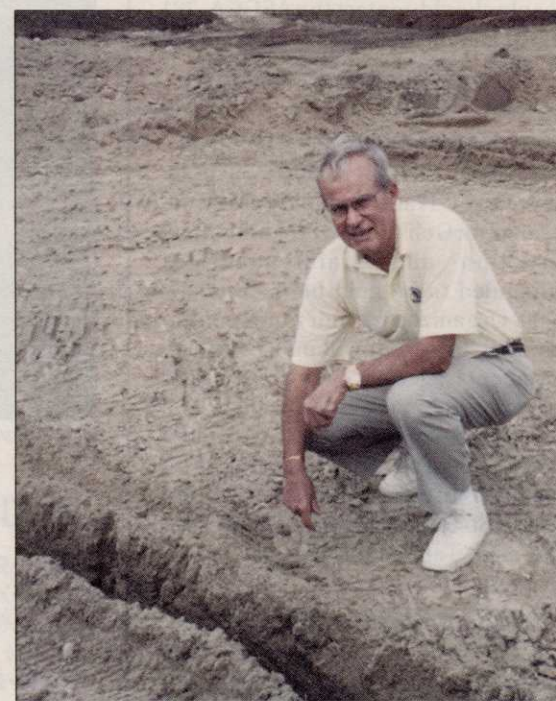
Even though the cost of the enterprise is daunting — \$3.3 million for everything involved — this hasn't stopped Mauro. "We have \$1.6 million in cash and pledges," he said, "and \$700,000 in in-kind contributions. We need another \$900,000 to complete."

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.

"Textron 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 vision

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including advising on the driving range, providing publicity to generate funds, and contacting others in the industry to help as Button Hole moves ahead.

"He never lets me down," Mauro said.

There's help on the job as well, according to Mauro. Volunteer Vinnie DeQuattro is a retired administrative worker for one of the largest road-building contractors in the state, and he's out at the site each day directing traffic as the earth is moved.

Izzo Construction, who was hired to build the course, found clean fill for the project, and has been bringing it in to help with the contours of the ground.

Dave Wallace of Tee and Seed "helped tremendously," by providing the sod at a very attractive price, Mauro said.

There are others, not even remotely related to the golf industry, who have helped as well.

"Dave Gavitt was the basketball coach at Providence College and the former executive general manager of the Boston Celtics," Mauro said, "and when he saw the property, he announced that his job would be to get golf clubs for the players. So we now have display stands and bins for these clubs and for golf balls at almost every public and private course in Rhode Island. The clubs are coming in like wildfire.

"Originally, we were going to cut down the clubs," he added, "but now we are planning to sell the donated clubs and get kids' clubs from the manufacturers. The manufacturers point out that if we want to help the kids play golf, they have to have the right clubs in their hands."

Hundreds of others have seen the vision for Button Hole, and have volunteered funds, time, and expertise in a variety of ways to help the project get off the ground and become a benchmark for First Tee. The community has rallied, too, from the state's participation to the support of Providence to the agencies within the various governments. There is grassroots support as well. Throughout the construction process, Mauro said, there has only been one small incident of vandalism, and signs, which are usually filled with graffiti on a project like this don't have a mark on them.

And through it all, Mauro takes little credit for the outpouring of support for a small idea that has grown into a big plan.

"I can't conceive of anything happening as it did for this project," he said. "There are so many things that have happened that we didn't make happen; they just came about. I truly believe that God's hands are on this project." ↑

GOLF COURSE NEWS

## Tater Hill GC undergoing facelift and name change

N. WINDHAM, Vt. — All 18 greens and tees will be relocated and fairways shifted in a complete redesign of Tater Hill Golf Course here. The \$1.1-million project at the semi-private club will be done in four phases over the coming years.

The course also will be renamed to call attention to the sweeping changes and its new persona. The existing name, Tater Hill, refers to the fertile old potato fields

over which the course is built. New names have been solicited from the membership and one will be selected soon.

Larger greens and finger-laying the design of the fairways are two of the notable changes in the redesign, drafted by architect Barry Jordan of Fayetteville, N.Y. The modifications will result in a course that continues to challenge all golfers.

Play will continue uninterrupted as the

work progresses, using temporary greens and tees as each hole is reworked.

"Eleven new holes and reconstruction of all remaining greens are highlights of a plan which will vastly improve routing, playability and strategy of the course," Jordan said. He added that the new design will test a player's ability to position shots upon a rolling terrain while moving them through a unique combination of golf landscapes.

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