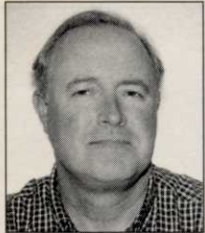


How risky is your course?

Once upon a time, long before Tiger Woods arrived on the scene, back when Arnold Palmer was building his "army," golf was a genteel sport. Doctors played it on Wednesday afternoons and the plaid-pants set came out on weekends. It was not a game for "the masses." The courses weren't crowded. Most players knew how to swing a club. And the "wild hack" was a figure of some disrepute and amusement. (I should know. I was one.)

Little remains of that world now. Public courses are packed, and wild hacks have proliferated like dandelions.



Jay Finegan,
editor

I recently played a course called Raspberry Falls, in Virginia. A foursome ahead of us was firing ugly shots one and sometimes two fairways over, often taking 10 minutes to hunt around for their balls. I didn't see a single drive land anywhere near a fairway, but I did see several near-misses of nearby players. When we caught up to this foursome at a backed-up par-3, they explained their agonizing pace by saying they were "playing for money."

With guys like that on the loose, it's no surprise that golf courses have become more hazardous than ever. It's anybody's guess how many players are injured by errant shots – the National Golf Foundation keeps no statistics on that. In the United Kingdom alone, however, insurance companies estimate that 8,000 to 10,000 people every year are admitted to hospitals after being hit by wild shots.

I bring this up in the context of a story on the front page this month. A Virginia course called Lansdowne Resort Golf Club (not far from Raspberry Falls) recently settled \$7.5 million on a man who was struck on the neck while standing on the practice putting green. The blow impeded the blood flow in an artery, bringing on a major stroke, and leaving James Tobin, now 45, in a wheelchair, unable to walk or work.

Tobin claimed the shot came from a driving range about 150 yards away, off to the left and separated by a berm. Lansdowne's general manager, Gerard Dumont, denied that Tobin ran a risk on that practice green. "We have had only this one reported incident in nine years of operation," he said in a statement. "During this time, over 250,000 rounds of golf have been played, and over 10 million golf balls have been hit from the practice range." But as the case moved through trial, Lansdowne's insurers decided to settle.

Needless to say, Tobin's attorneys – Gary Mims and William O. Snead III – disagreed with Dumont's assessment of the risk involved in the layout. "They knew it was a safety problem," Snead said. "Every golfer who went on that practice green was unknowingly exposed to danger. They basically played a high-risk game of roulette. It was never a question of if somebody would get hit; it was only a question of when and how bad."

Even though the course management believed the set-up was safe (they have since changed it), it evidently wasn't – not with the caliber of wild hacks on the loose nowadays. And that's the problem. Courses that got away with questionable designs when the average player was competent now confront a much different situation. "Crowded courses and crazy shots have changed everything," said Mims. "You see guys driving around with a case of beer in the cart, and they'd just as soon run over you as hit you with a golf ball."

In our litigious culture, you can't be too cautious. "I've had lots of calls from country clubs since the case hit the press," said Gary Mims. "It's not because someone has been injured, but because of similar issues. On some courses, you have chipping greens that face

Continued on next page

Good-bye Sunbelt, hello Snowbelt

As the golf markets in the South and Southwest are reaching saturation, more golf course management firms are now looking to the North and Northeast, sensing opportunity.

There are many advantages to owning and operating courses in the Northeast and Midwest, according to Golf Property Analysts principal Larry Hirsh. "There are many operational issues that affect profitability," he said in September's issue of *Golf Course News*. "In the South, they have to be open all year long, and maintained all year long. In many cases ... people don't want to play golf in the summertime, but that's when they have the most tee times to sell because of the daylight. In the North, the playing season is shorter, but they can sell tee times up 'til four o'clock."

This is one reason why Bob Husband, who is head of acquisitions-minded Heritage Golf Group, is planning to target the Snowbelt as the company grows. (See story on page 27.) "The North is attractive," he said, "because even though the season is shorter, the courses are packed all summer and then you can actually close down in the winter. Some of the clubs that I have seen in the North make more money because in the winter the costs go away. In Arizona, though, when it is hot and people don't want to play, you still have to operate the course."

How can shorter playing seasons and long, cold winters possibly add up to larger operational profits?

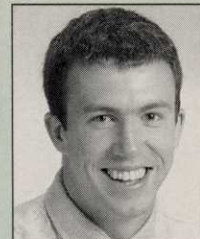
One reason is that the player numbers and participation rates are just as compelling as the operational advantages. According to the National Golf Foundation's 2000 Golf Participation in the United States survey, the East North Central (Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio) region of the country has the most golfers (nearly 6 million), the second highest participation rate (15.6 percent) and saw the most rounds (121.8 million) in 1999. The West North Central region (North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri) rang up the highest participation rate, 15.7 percent, and rates for the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions both topped 11 percent.

With a large and active golfing population, as well as access to major cities, opportunities in the Snowbelt clearly exist.

"You have to pick your spots, but it is a good place to be," Husband said. "There is always talk about people moving out of cold climates to the Sunbelt. But there are also people who have roots in the North and who want to live there to stay close to family and friends."

Del Webb Corp. is looking to cash in on this reality with its new golf community outside of Chicago. Sun City Huntley is the company's first development outside of the Southwest. "So many of our buyers in the Sunbelt come to us from the Midwest," said Henry DeLozier, vice president of golf operations. "We felt that our brand was well known and recognized in this market and the demographics were there."

Look for golf course owners and operators to exploit this market as we move into 2001.



Andrew Overbeck,
managing editor

John was a regular contributor to *Southern Golf* magazine for 12 years, before its recent closing, and has delivered lectures on golf-related landscaping all over the world. We're delighted to have John on the team here at *Golf Course News*. His first column appears on page 8.



John Piersol

New columnist joins GCN staff

In this issue we welcome aboard John Piersol as a monthly columnist. As an educator, horticulturalist and expert in golf course maintenance, John will bring unique insights into topics of current interest to superintendents.

Since 1986, he has chaired the division of golf, landscaping and forestry at Lake City Community College, in Lake City, Fla., one of the country's best-known training grounds for superintendents.

John joined the faculty there in 1974, after receiving a master's degree in horticulture from Colorado State University. He also has a bachelor's in horticulture from the University of Delaware, and served as a member of Antarctic Development Squadron Six during a stint in the Navy.

HOUSE OF CORRECTIONS

In last month's issue, in a front-page article about the new Dragon course at Gold Mountain, Calif., the architect was incorrectly identified. Robin Nelson designed the Dragon, not Robin Freeman. Nelson has been involved in designing more than 100 courses worldwide, including numerous layouts in Asia and the South Pacific. He recently moved his headquarters from Hawaii to Mill Valley, Calif.

We deeply regret the mistake.

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Kevin Downing, CGCS
Willoughby Golf Club
Tim Hiers, CGCS
Collier's Reserve
Ted Horton
The Pebble Beach Co.
Dr. Michael Hurdzan
Hurdzan • Fry Golf Course Design
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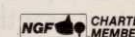
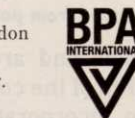
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