

Ski resorts adding golf courses for four-season success

By DAVE IRONS

VAIL, Colo. — Recent ski resort expansions are as likely to include golf courses as ski lifts, and the list of architects is a who's who of the trade. Greg Norman. Tom Fazio. Jack Nicklaus. Robert Trent Jones Jr. All have courses already completed or under construction at ski resorts — and more can be expected.

At first glance the numbers may not seem to add up, but a bit of digging reveals a synergy between golf and ski resorts that can spell the difference between failure and success. Simply put, ski resorts need a huge bed base to operate, and if that bed base can be put to four-season use the benefits are obvious. Spread the cost of the beds over four seasons and increase revenue accordingly. Turn a seasonal staff into a year-round staff, at least with key people.

That's simple enough, but a major ski area can accommodate 10,000 skiers a day and fill the same number of beds. How can a golf course that can handle only 250 a day (maxed out) fill that many beds?

THE INTRAWEST SOLUTION

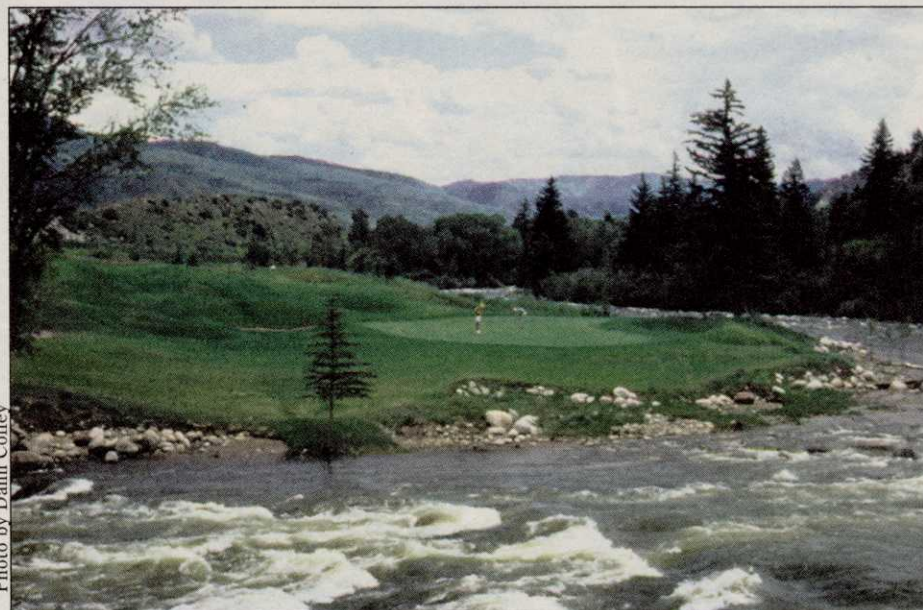
Some of the most successful resort

operations in North America had some answers.

One of the most spectacular transformations has taken place at Mont Tremblant, owned by Intrawest. The Vancouver-based real estate firm also owns Whistler/Blackcomb, Stratton Mountain, Mountain Creek, and large pieces of several other ski properties. When Intrawest bought Mont Tremblant, in Quebec, it was struggling to attract 200,000 skiers a season. And summer business was insignificant.

In 1999-2000 the resort had close to 700,000 skier visits, and this summer it will host more than 1.2 million visitors. A pair of five-year, \$500-million plans have created a modern ski facility and a charming base village, and have attracted major hotel chains including Canadian Pacific, Westin and Marriot. Out of \$1 billion dollars Canadian (\$650 million U.S.), \$20 million for a pair of golf courses and a learning center is a drop in the bucket, but the payoff has been big.

According to Denis Legueux, an Intrawest vice president, golf anchors the summer activities. Last season the two courses accommodated 52,000 rounds and 60 percent of the



The 12th hole at The Country Club of the Rockies, in Arrowhead, Colo.

players slept at the resort. The shoulder-season months, May and June, were heavy in convention business, which filled more beds, with non-golfers also in attendance. While corporate decision-makers often insist on golf at their conferences, many of the attendees and their guests are non-players, so tee times don't need to match the beds filled.


BOYNE PIONEERED CONCEPT

Actually, the first ski resort to add golf was Boyne USA. The Michigan company commissioned Robert Trent Jones to de-

sign The Heather at Boyne Highlands in 1965 as part of its business plan to become a full-service resort.

Today nine courses are in operation in Michigan and a tenth is under construction as part of the Renaissance of Boyne Mountain. In addition to the two ski resorts and three other Michigan properties, Boyne USA owns Big Sky in Montana, Brighton in Utah, Crystal Mountain in Washington, Boyne South in Naples,

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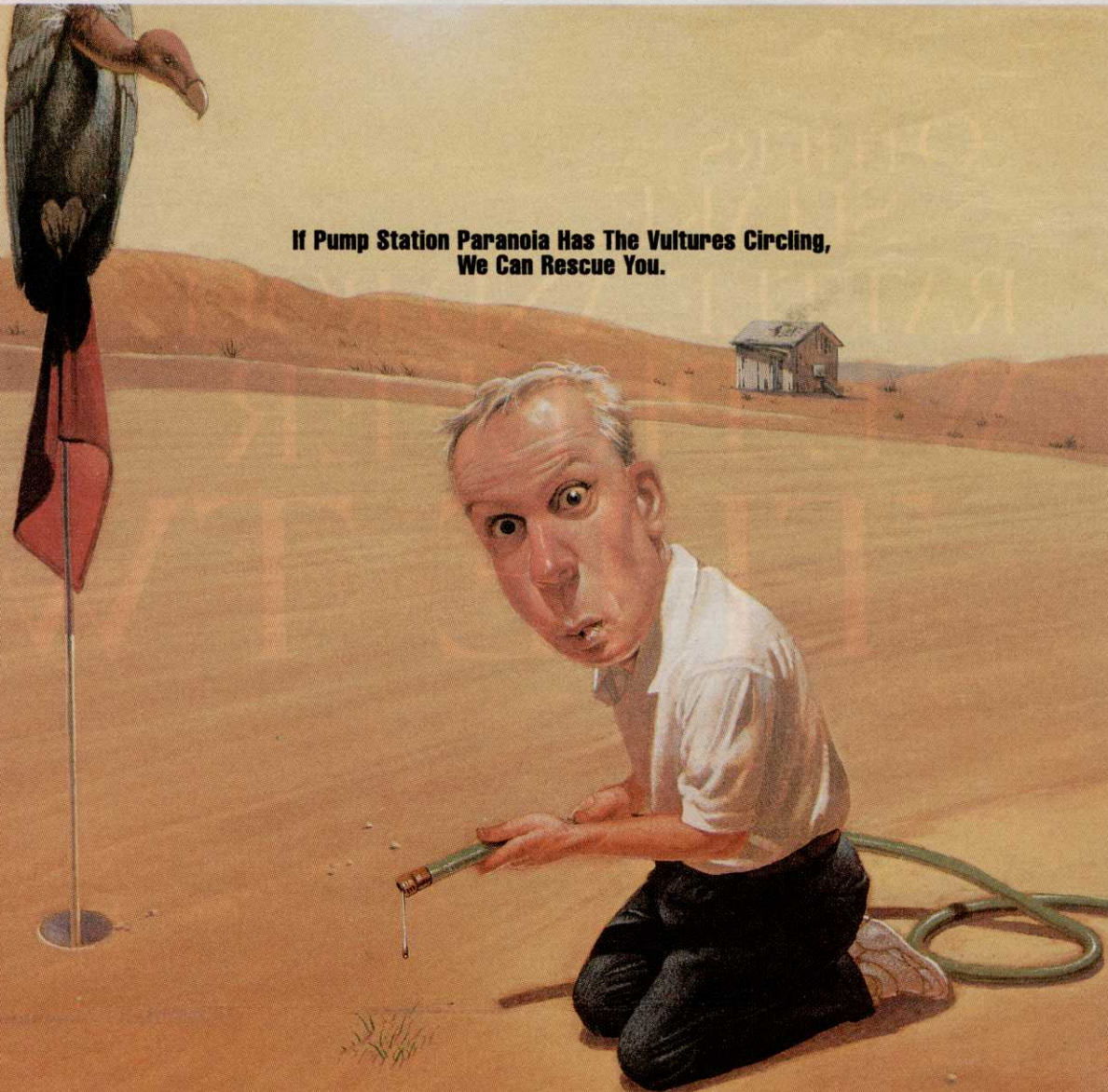


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Ski resorts adding golf courses

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Fla., and Gatlinburg Skyline in Tennessee.

Boyne general manager Stephen Kircher credits his father and founder Everett Kircher (at 84 still on the job every day) with the idea to give the company a year-round base. The concept was a masterstroke. "The ski industry is tough right now," he said. "We've had three consecutive off winters and those that aren't in four-season operation are going under."

He seconded Legueux's idea that convention business doesn't happen without golf. There's plenty of competition for Boyne. Since The Heather was built in 1965, 57 courses have been built in Michigan.

Kircher summed up the decision for more golf simply: "You can't build another mountain, but you can build another golf course."

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH END

Out west, golf is taking on even greater magnitude here in the Rockies.

Jim Thompson, president of Vail Resorts Development Co., cites golf as critical to high-end real estate sales and attracting major hotels for the ski operations. Vail Resorts owns and oper-

ates Vail, Beaver Creek, Keystone, Breckenridge and hospitality assets at Jackson Hole.

Interestingly, the company is building expensive private golf clubs with Tom Fazio and Greg Norman layouts, now under construction at Red Sky, nine miles from Vail. Four hundred memberships will be sold with initiation fees of \$100,000, which will pay the \$40-million cost. The opportunity to join such a club will add \$100,000 to the price of a building lot. As Thompson puts it, "The golf drives the real estate sales and the summer bed base."

Hotels also demand golf. Ritz Carlton is building a 240-room hotel here, and it required golf availability for its guests as a condition. The resort gets more needed beds for skiers.

The Red Sky development is based on the Beaver Creek model, where half the tee times go to members and the rest to guests at Vail. Two club houses will be built, one luxurious for members and the other smaller for guests. The two groups will rotate daily with members playing one course one day and the other the next. The members have their private club and guests have two fine courses to play.

The Links at Outlook

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those areas with his tee shots."

"The property on [the east] side of the road began as mostly flat land," said Flynn. "It required several shapes and cuts to give it that flowing Scottish feel that complicates some approach shots."

A welcoming supply of rangers and directional flags are available to assist first-timers here with blind shots, such as the 4th hole, a 475-yard par-5. The bunkers don't pose a real threat here, but a misdirected tee shot could be difficult to play against the strategically placed mounds. It may also prove impossible to find a ball, let alone play it, if it lands in the thick, knee-high native grass.

WEST SIDE STORY

The remaining seven holes, 11 through 17, are reached by traveling under the main road by way of a concrete structured tunnel. Playing these seven – the west side holes – demand an entirely different strategy, as they are situated on and around a wooded hill in the more traditional style of a New England golf course.

The west side design required more cuts and excavations, but the outcome appears promising. Reaching the 12th tee on top of the hill, one may turn around and admire the strategic shaping Brian Silva has accomplished over on the east side. Then it is followed by another impressive panoramic view off the 13th tee that overlooks part of the town of South Berwick. Of course, the tee shot itself is a blind downhill drive on a 361-yard par-4 from the blue markers.

After the 11th hole, there are no more water hazards to contend with, but other obstacles present themselves. Course superintendent John Roesser, CGCS, explained that there's been some erosion

that has affected parts of holes 15 and 16 from the unusually heavy summer rains; he added rocks and topsoil to provide support. Repositioning of tees is also being considered as a means to reduce erosion effects.

Although the openness of the more traditional links-style holes on the east side of the course warns golfers to take heed of the wind factor in their strategy, the wind also plays a significant role when up on the hill, dictating aiming adjustments.

"We have been in operation only for a short time," said Jeff Maldonis, director of marketing (the course opened in June). "We want the public to notice our exceptional greens and fairways first."

FIRST-TIME HEAD SUPERINTENDENT

Other features of the course will continue to develop over time. John Roesser also discussed the current development of a new driving range box along the roadside and the planned addition of a practice chipping green and bunker. Providing the weather cooperates, the new driving range should be in operation before the golfing season ends here, usually around Halloween.

This is Roesser's first time in a head superintendent position. After college, he served an internship at Pebble Beach Golf Course, in California, and another one at National Golf Lands. He was hired for the job at The Links at Outlook directly from the construction company, Inner Golf, which shaped the course.

The southern Maine course is within easy striking range of Portland, Maine, and Portsmouth, N.H., and is just over an hour's drive from Boston.

The Links at Outlook shows promise with its unique design, and given time for enhancements, management hopes to prove the course is indeed "a public course with private club conditions." ■



Photo by Dann Coffey

Mountainside housing at Bachelor Gulch, which is a property of Vail Resorts Development Co.

The Vail model might be atypical with such expensive real estate. A development underway at Bachelor Gulch has already sold 56 of its 600 units for homes that will cost over \$5 million each. A common cost of building in the area is \$1,000 a square foot.

The numbers differ, but the three companies all agree that golf is a key factor in developing four-season resort operations,

which are an absolute must to keep ski resorts viable. And the multiple resort companies are not alone. Smaller mountains such as Ragged in New Hampshire now have golf courses, and others are building or considering golf.

In fact, golf may just be the key ingredient in the survival of the ski industry. For some exciting golf, keep your eye on the mountains. ■

Jim Fazio Q&A

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I had a young Bahamian on the tractor who had been trained at Huntington Hartford's course (the Arawak Golf Club on Paradise Island). He was a great shaper but one day I loaned him my car and he got drunk and smashed my car so bad that it wouldn't run again. So he gave me a bicycle to make up for it. That taught me not to lend my car again – I rode that bike for two years.

GCN: Which countries have you worked in?

Fazio: In addition to the Bahamas, I've worked in Spain, Italy, Puerto Rico, Japan, Mexico, and now, Turkey. Plus all my work in the United States. My son, Tommy, is working with me on Grand Bahama now, where we're renovating the Ruby and Emerald Course at the old Princess Resort (now Bahamia). So, since 1964 to 2000, I'm back in the Bahamas again.

GCN: Turning to Italy where you have been so active, are these projects just for tourism and resorts?

Fazio: Well, in Italy in 1986/87 there were about 120 golf courses. Since then another 50 have gone in. The majority are located in the northern region near the commercial centers and bigger cities. Southern Italy is a lot different with less interest, and a drier, more mountainous land. Rome is a city tourist attraction, and people don't go there to play golf mainly. The coastal regions and the weather are not really set up for resort golf operations. Some of the other Mediterranean coasts of Turkey, Spain, and Portugal are more likely to attract resort golfers.

The project we are doing now is in

Verona, in the northern region, where the local business people and visitors from Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and France can drive in a few hours. It is called Club Paradiso, on a beautiful private estate, and will be open for anyone to play. A new hotel will be added to the older estate buildings next year.

The developer and I first got together in 1988, and that shows you how long it takes to get permits in Italy. The land use, labor regulations and environmental permits are very strict, and years can go by while all these things are resolved. We started construction in July. Nine holes will open by 2002, and the other nine will open in 2003.

GCN: Do you approach design from a "heroic" or "strategic" perspective?

Fazio: When a golfer stands on the tee I want him to know there's a place for him to play to. If he hits it to the right area, he will find the way to avoid the hazards. You get 14 chances to design the hole to achieve this – on the par 3's, of course, you are aiming at the green. You have to give the golfer a chance, the right angle to hit the shot that will give the right result. Don't let the course eat him up. Let him anticipate success if he puts it in the right part of the fairway.

GCN: Is this the Fazio philosophy?

Fazio: Yes. If I see 6,600 yards on the scorecard I know I can play to my handicap. That's what I try to give the golfer, a chance to play to his handicap. In my designs at La Querce in Italy, Hawks Nest in Florida, or The Woodlands in Maine, I have put these ideas into the course. They are a challenge, but are fun to play for all levels of players. ■