

## INTERNATIONAL REPORT

### Extreme golf: Fream breaks ground in Sahara Desert

By JAY FINEGAN

TOZEUR, Tunisia — You have to hand it to Ron Fream. The man isn't afraid of a challenge.

This past New Year's Day, the California-based golf architect broke ground here at this date palm oasis in the Sahara Desert. If work proceeds as planned, the Sahara's first 18-hole course will open for play next winter.

Although Tozeur has an airport, about a dozen hotels and a mainly Berber population of 20,000, it seems rather remote. It sits on a caravan route from Timbuktu to Carthage — near today's Tunis — that dates back 3,000 years.

The Mediterranean coast is four hours to the north. Timbuktu lies 1,000 miles southwest through the Algerian Sahara. The landscape is so other-worldly that film-maker George Lucas bought 1,000 acres near here where he shoots his "Star Wars" movies.

Weather conditions can be tough. The area gets only about two inches of rain per year. In the summer, daytime temperatures reach 122 degrees. But in the winter, Fream said, it's delightful. "It will be a balmy 77 degrees here, when it's below freezing in Paris or Helsinki and the days are only five hours long," he said. "North African courses are like the Palm Springs of Europe. It's becoming kind of an 'in' thing to go into the desert on safaris."

Construction conditions are a bit unusual, too. "There is a challenge just getting design ideas across when the local labor crew has no understanding of what a golf course is," the architect said.

But Fream has prepared a master plan to clear the site-related hurdles of sandstone outcroppings, eroded valleys, fine drifting sand, little existing vegetation and a rather demanding water source.

#### 15 YEARS TO GROUND-BREAKING

Fream is no stranger to these parts. He has made more than 40 visits to Tunisia



A rendering of the first hole at Ron Fream's Oasis Golf Club

since he first started building courses in North Africa almost 30 years ago.

Indeed, Fream & Dale Golfplan, based in Santa Rosa, Calif., has built seven courses already in Tunisia, including a Cypress Point look-alike called Tabarka on the coast. Together, those courses handle some 300,000 rounds a year.

But those projects pale compared to the building of the Oasis Golf Club. "Somebody in Palm Springs will say, 'Oh, we've built courses in the desert.' I've got a golf course in Palm Springs, too," Fream said. "And doing golf in the desert there is kids' stuff. It's for junior high school boys. I picked this site 15 years ago, and it's taken us that long just to get to ground-breaking."

#### PASPALUM TO THE RESCUE

Water supply, oddly enough, isn't a major concern. Fream plans to pull about one million gallons a day from a sewage treatment plant located some six miles away. "They agreed to put in a bigger pipeline," he said, "and we can get up to 4,000 cubic meters a day. That's a lot of water."

Even so, he will limit maintained turf to 60 or 70 acres. "It will be target golf," he said, "with nothing but the raw sand around. We've been working with Ronny Duncan at the University of Georgia, and we're trying to use their new Seashore Paspalum. We're establishing a nursery to produce it. We'll try to use the new Sea Isle 2000 for putting surfaces, and either the Salam or the Sea Isle variety for tees, fairways and maintained roughs."

Why paspalum? Because the treated water from the sewage plant has some 4,000 parts per billion of salt — it's almost as salty as ocean water. Paspalum can handle that degree of salinity.

#### CAMEL-PULLED CARTS

The heavy construction machinery will come in from Tunis, but Fream will lean heavily on local labor.

"Donkey and camel-pulled carts are common around here, and we'll use them to transport some of the construction materials," he said. "We'll use hand labor for the excavation of trenches and for

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The 14th and 15th holes at Sparrebosch play along oceanside cliffs.

holes have now been completed.

While fairways are generous at Sparrebosch, wayward shots are penalized. However, good ball placement is rewarded. The par-5 first hole offers an eagle opportunity for long-hitters who have to clear a natural forest that impinges on the fairway. Fortunately for the shorter hitter, or the simply fainthearted, there's a dropping zone on the other side of the forest. So all is not lost right at the

beginning. The 14th and 15th holes, situated along steep cliffs, are a truly memorable experience.

The course makes full use of the natural, wild terrain, creating a long layout. A golf car is not only a good idea, but compulsory. To speed up play, the club provides a nourishing roll and a cool drink in order to eliminate waiting at the "halfway house." Each golf car comes supplied with a full chest of ice.

### Player's new Links Course has South Africa talking

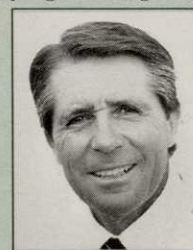
By JAY FINEGAN

GEORGE, South Africa — Gary Player's new Links Course here has been open only since November, but already it's being favorably compared to such fabled links layouts as Royal Troon, Ballyunion, Prestwick and Royal Birkdale. So lavish has been the praise that the new track will host the PGA Tour's Presidents Cup in 2002.

"The Links resembles these grand links in that it has wind-blown dunes with low-lying areas, giving it a tidal appearance,"

said Chris Davison, a professional golfer who is now director of the course.

"Another feature of The Links is its rolling greens, which are not often seen in South Africa. It's set to test the best golfers in the world in every way."



Gary Player

Located between the Indian Ocean and the Outeniqua Mountains on the Western Cape, George is a somewhat isolated resort town on South Africa's scenic Garden Route. It does have an airport, however.

#### THIRD COURSE AT FAN COURT

The Links is the third Gary Player layout at Fancourt Hotel and Country Club Estate, which took the top prize as 1999's "resort of the year" for all of Africa and the Middle East in the Hertz International Golf Travel Awards. The fourth Player design here, the Academy Course, will be completed later in 2001.

The resort's owners, a German couple named Hasso and Sabina Plattner, purchased the property in 1994, when its fortunes were sagging. The estate featured only 27 holes of golf at the time. Since then, thanks to large infusions of cash and the efforts of the Gary Player Design Co., the Fancourt complex has become an aristocrat of South Africa's golf destinations. The new course will only enhance that reputation.

"The Links has satisfied and far exceeded my design philosophy, which was to capture the essence of what makes great traditional links so special," said Hasso Plattner. "I believe that The Links will provide golfers with the most natural golf experience — which, to me, is what golf is all about."

#### AN ALL-WEATHER CHALLENGE

More than 700,000 cubic meters of earth were moved to turn flat

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### Sparrebosch opens, offering staggering Indian Ocean views

By JACQUIE STAFFORD

KYNSNA, South Africa — Continued development and recent course openings here in Cape Providence have offered up new experiences for the golfing connoisseur. Three courses, two new and one longer, more established course, provide wildlife, variety and, of course, golf at the Steenberg, Arabella, and Sparrebosch layouts.

For sheer stunning scenery, the Ron Fream-designed Sparrebosch is hard to beat — anywhere in the world. Set on the Knysna Heads overlooking the Indian Ocean, the views are breathtaking. This is a true links-style course and the rough is Cape fynbos (similar to Scottish heather), which local rules treat as a lateral hazard. Apart from the fact that you would never find your ball in it, the rule is to protect the sensitive ecology. All 18