

ARCHITECTS, DEVELOPERS TARGET  
NONTRADITIONAL COURSE NICHES

# shorter loops

By T.R. Massey

**G**olf course development is in a holding pattern. The need for new, 18-hole championship courses isn't as great as it was a decade ago, and new-builds have slowed during the last few years. The cyclical pattern happens as the sport's popularity waxes and wanes.

But it's not as if there's nothing going on. Many golf course architects say they're working on renovating older courses. There are still active areas of new development in the South and West. But in urban areas of the country reaching

a saturation point for traditional golf courses, some see a new niche developing that includes nontraditional, inexpensive projects.

"I think it's a trend," says Michael Hurdzan, a principle of Columbus, Ohio-based Hurdzan/Fry Golf Course Design and author of the book, "Building a Practical Golf Facility." "If we don't recognize that people are living a faster pace of life, then we're making a huge mistake," he says.

That's why when local developer Bill McCorkle called Hurdzan last year to ask for advice

about what to do with 17 acres of green space, Hurdzan had plenty of ideas.

"Our gut feeling was that there was a market for a nontraditional facility," Hurdzan says. "He only had so much acreage, so there was a leap of faith on his part that we were right."

McCorkle had purchased 85 acres of land adjacent to Polaris, one of the biggest retail areas in Columbus, and intended to build 93 single-family homes and 54 condos there.

"The township designated 20 percent had to be open space and recreational-use applied,"

Developer Bill McCorkle believed there was a need for a public golf course instead of soccer fields and baseball diamonds on the 17 acres of land he owns that was set aside for green space.

Photo: Little Bear Golf Course





McCorkle says. "Rather than 17 acres of soccer fields or baseball diamonds, I felt there was a need for a public course that was good for recreational players."

Between them, Hurdzan and McCorkle had enough knowledge to move forward without a market study.

"I went from my own personal experiences and talked to friends and colleagues and clients," McCorkle says. "It was informal, but the local market is saturated with 18-hole courses. There are so many first-rate country clubs and championship courses, I didn't feel like I was competing with them. My price point was lower and more accessible."

McCorkle saw an opportunity on which he hopes to capitalize when he opens Little Bear Golf Course, his 10-hole (two loops of five) par-3 facility this season.

"There aren't that many juniors and seniors

and women playing those championship courses," he says. "I felt like there was a large, untapped market of people who enjoy golf – those who want to learn aren't going to Muirfield Village Golf Club to learn to play. I felt like my course would be a feeder system for the country clubs. They learn here and get a membership somewhere else."

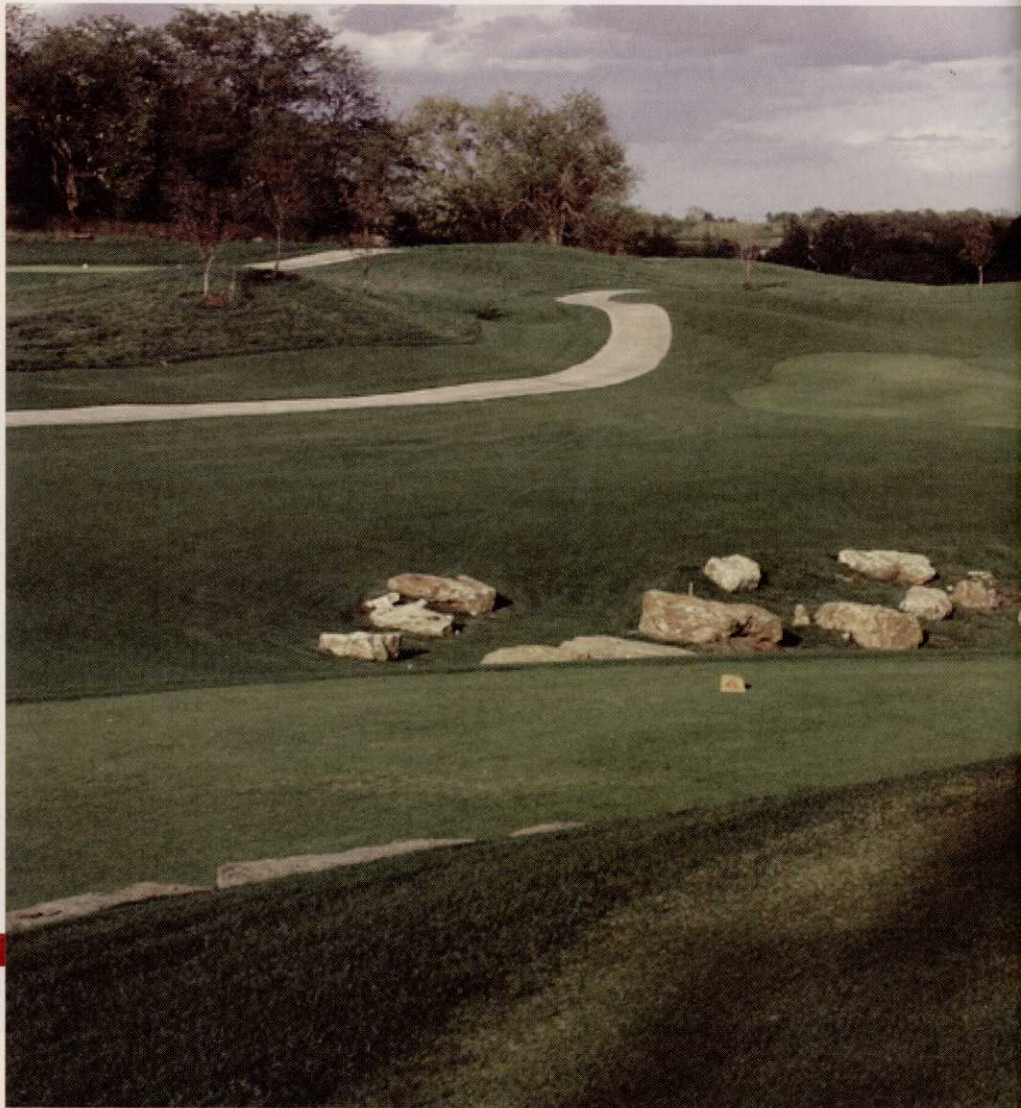
In addition to being an alternative-type golf facility, Little Bear also has artificial turf on the tees and greens, so maintenance costs will be almost nothing, and those areas won't damage as easily as natural-turf greens.

"I was the guy talking him into the artificial turf greens," Hurdzan says. "It made perfect sense. He doesn't have to have a pesticide applicator on staff, no fertilizers – all the traditional things you worry about with housing development deals."

After testing several varieties of man-made

It cost \$3.5 million to build the nine-hole Falcon Valley Golf Club in Lenexa, Kan. Photo: Falcon Valley Golf Club

The nine-hole Falcon Valley Golf Club is projected to generate 30,000 rounds this year. The club's owner says the local market is saturated with 18-hole courses. Photo: Falcon Valley Golf Club



turf, McCorkle was convinced.

McCorkle arranged to have the golf course construction be part of the overall development loan. He further strengthened his financial operation by tying in the storm water management program from the subdivision to a series of lakes on the course so it can be used for irrigation.

The small development is inside a larger cluster of about 2,000 homes, all of which are within walking distance of Little Bear. The course also is close to a high-density business area.

"I thought there might be some corporate outings," McCorkle says. "People do business while they golf, but it doesn't have to take five hours. You can play this course in 90 minutes and still close a deal."

Additionally, McCorkle built a 14,000-square-foot clubhouse that's geared for parties, receptions, banquets and corporate meetings.

"That was needed to supplement the golf," he says. "In the dead of winter, you need extra income."

#### COME AND LEARN

Identifying places for newcomers to learn is what drove the city of Fargo, N.D., to build the 12-hole Osgood Golf Course three years ago. A local developer gave the city 100 acres of land on the newly developing southwest side of town. It also helped that the city's parks and recreation district commissioners were forward-thinking golfers.

Colorado-based architect Rick Phelps had worked for the city before, and this time, officials told him they wanted something different.

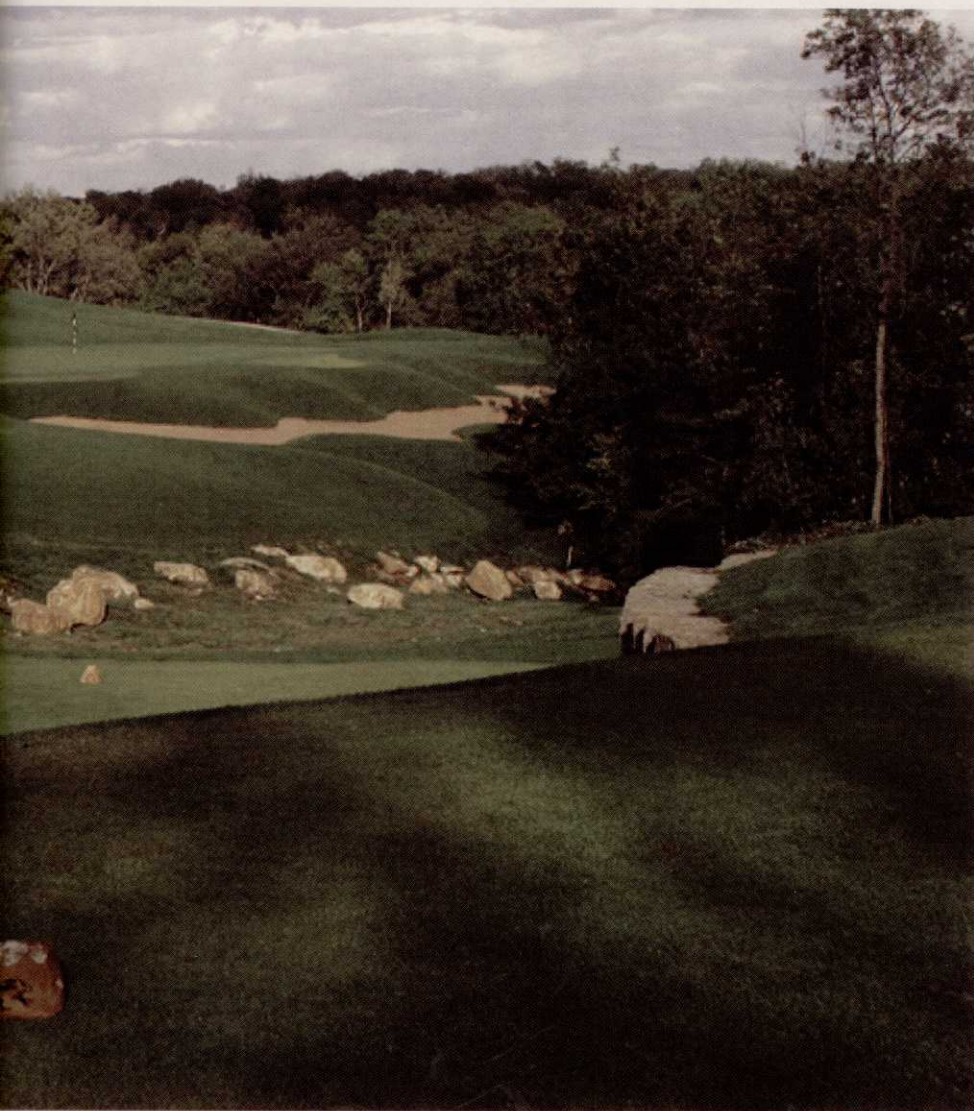
"Both our 18-hole courses are similar, and our two nine-hole courses are packed," says Roger Gress, executive director of the Fargo Park District.

With the feeling a market study was superfluous, the city had Phelps build a 12-hole course of three four-hole loops. There are 1,000 kids in the Fargo summer golf program, and the unique setup allows Osgood to be conformed in a variety of ways, including a nine-hole course with three holes set aside for teaching or maintenance purposes.

"We have college kids teaching, and the driving range is big, so it will be a money-maker," Gress says. "If we do our job maintaining it, it's going to be popular."

Phelps, whose associate Kevin Atkinson was the main designer for Osgood, sees the same successful future for the facility.

"We're trying to do what we can to bring in



new people," Phelps says. "The research I've read indicates there's a tremendous number of people thinking about taking up the game but are intimidated by cost, time constraints or just the thought of playing 18 holes. We have to get rid of that stigma."

Osgood is a short course but has three par-5s. Its popularity grew from 9,100 nine-hole rounds in its first year of operation to 21,000 last year.

"If you go 10 or 20 years and looked back, I'd like to think by year five or six revenues are paying for expenses, not debt service," Gress says. "Once it's paid off, it's an incredible amenity and should take care of itself."

The city paid \$2.8 million for the course's construction (the maintenance facility was

\$350,000 of that) and is charging \$15 green fees for nine-hole rounds.

"We had enough money in our budget, and there haven't been any problems so far," Gress says. "We wanted to push youth golf and teaching. We think we hit a home run with it."

Phelps sees the need for more courses like Osgood. He and Atkinson are working on a course in Colorado that will be a companion to nearby Antler Creek Golf Course, which is the state's longest course at 8,113 yards. The sister course is 6,700 yards with four- and six-hole loops that return to the clubhouse.

"You don't have to play 18," Phelps says. "The way the routing is set up, you can play four, six or nine holes if you want. Not everyone wants

to play 8,100 yards at a tournament venue. You can't bring the kids out there. It's too much for them."

#### FINDING A NICHE

Near Kansas City in Lenexa, Kan., Dean Ralston and a partner recently bought the 3,400-yard, nine-hole Falcon Valley Golf Club, a Craig Schreiner-designed layout that opened in 2002. Ralston sees an advantage in a nine-hole layout – great quality golf for those who don't have the time to play 18-holes.

Originally, the course was supposed to be paired with nearby Falcon Ridge Golf Club, but deals fell through and there wasn't room for 18 additional holes.



The 12-hole Osgood Golf Course in Fargo, N.D., was built on 100 acres of land. Its popularity increased from 9,100 nine-hole rounds in its first year of operation to 21,000 last year. Photo: Osgood Golf Course

“There can be quality in less than 18 holes,” Ralston says. “Seventy percent of our players play only nine holes.”

Financed through a local bank and benefiting from market studies, the facility was built for about \$3.5 million on 120 acres of land and includes a 4,500-square-foot clubhouse.

“People are so busy with work, activities and kids, we offer a good quality course at a value and alleviate the time constraint,” Ralston says.

The area is saturated with 18-hole facilities, and with Falcon Valley’s location and quality, it’s in a great niche, Ralston says.

Ralston projects 30,000 nine-hole rounds this year, with greens fees at \$27 including cart on weekends and holidays. Surrounded by high-end housing, Ralston sees a growing group of people who will take advantage of high-quality golf without the pressure of 18 holes.

**SMALLER CAN BE BETTER**

John McDonald, one of the owners of golf course builder John McDonald & Sons in Jessup, Md., believes there’s an untapped reserve of golfers who want such nontraditional layouts.

“There are people who don’t want to spend the money or the time who will come out for the right place,” he says. “Those who want to spend an hour and a half will love 10-hole courses, or places with multiple holes for the same green. If you built the right features on the right piece of land, you could tap a part of the market that doesn’t even golf right now.”

That’s what’s needed to get the next genera-

tion into the game, McDonald says.

“Ultimately you need to get people on a smaller property to get them into golf,” he says. “That perpetuates the next group of people who will play golf on the next group of 18-hole golf courses that will need to be built in the next decade or so.”

McDonald is on the same page with Hurdzan when talking about nontraditional golf. Hurdzan believes small facilities can be built that dictate

**“There can be quality in less than 18 holes. Seventy percent of our players play only nine holes.”**

**- DEAN RALSTON**

a reduced-distance golf ball. He also sees room for modifying existing golf courses.

“In a couple of places, we’re suggesting we take the last three holes of the course and design extra tees and greens and break them off from the rest of the course,” he says. “You could play them in the morning before anyone ever gets out there. You’re appealing to a different market. You could take a big golf course and make it a smaller one. That way, people who only want to enjoy the course for an hour in the morning can do it.” **GCI**

*T.R. Massey is a freelance writer based in Columbus, Ohio. He can be reached at [trm@columbus.rr.com](mailto:trm@columbus.rr.com).*