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A new golf course

Five years ago, the announcement of a new golf course usually got lost in the shuffle of 300 to 500 new golf courses being built. Now that the number of new U.S. course starts has dropped 99 percent to about three to five this year, the press release of a new golf course I'm designing in Mayetta, Kan., was big news, drawing inquiries from as far away as England. I can only be described as being a "happy camper" to have the chance to design this course. I will spend the next few months chronicling the ideas and techniques behind the process.

Of course, to design the golf course, we had to "sell the job" against incredible competition. The Prairie Band of Potawatomi decided to build a golf course almost as soon as it built its casino in 1998, but first it had to complete other important reservation facilities such as hospitals and schools. I actually visited with them around 2000 when working in the area.

By August of 2008, they were ready to go and issued an RFQ to 13 golf course architects who had expressed interest. They received twice that many proposals from others who heard about the process. However, during the process, they decided to switch to a design/build approach; because golf was new to them, some of their staff preferred this method, and other tribes had used that approach. They reissued the RFP as a design/build proposal.

Luckily for me, Native American pro golfer Notah Begay III lives in Dallas, knew me and was interested in designing golf courses for Native American tribes. He had completed one project as a consultant, but wanted to design his first signature course with a qualified golf course architect he could work well with, and we hit it off. He also had a relationship with an excellent golf course builder, Landscapes Unlimited, whom I also had used on previous projects.

We formed a team that probably was "the leader in the clubhouse" between Notah's star power and personal connection, the design/build experience of Landscapes Unlimited, especially in Native American courses, and my track record of already having designed the top two public courses in Kansas and a highly ranked Native American course in Minnesota, which happens to be the chairman's favorite course. But we took nothing for granted. I think we won the commission not so much on past qualifications, but on our hard work in putting together our proposal and presentation.

Our proposal addressed their specific concerns. We prepared a routing and some before and after pictures of what their course would look like. We discussed pros and cons of different clubhouse and maintenance area locations. We reviewed existing water tests and sent soil samples for soil tests. We showed how our design/build team would provide more than architecture, by designing them a golf course Web site, developing preliminary youth golf and soccer programs (one of Notah's passions) and showing Landscapes Unlimited's comprehensive budget control program.

We took great care to understand the land that's equally important in both Native American culture and golf course design. We discussed how their site had three unique site "zones" (agriculture, pasture and heavy woods) and how the design would take advantage of each. They knew that Notah and I had walked the land multiple times, in part because someone called security upon seeing strangers driving on the property. In once case, a council member helped tow my rental car from the mud. While nearly being arrested is not usually good business practice, in this case, I think it paid benefits in securing the job for our team. The decision came down just before Christmas 2008, which was a nice present. **GCI**

Design/Construction Journal

Over the next few months, Jeff Brauer's column will detail the ins and outs of his experiences participating in the design and construction of a new golf course in Mayetta, Kan.

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