



D.S. Resch

shaper, this guy just shows up out of the blue – Matt Loos. He'd heard about our project and just stopped by. He'd been working all over the world, was looking to stay closer to home and wanted a shot at our project. He said, 'Show me something you want done.' Well, I'd cut out hundreds of pictures from different golf magazines and showed him a mounding feature I liked. He took off, and I came back later that afternoon, and you'd swear he'd shaped it just like the picture. Matt ended up doing the shaping, all the pipe work, etc. He talked his brother, Chris, into coming up here and working with us. He did all the greens and grow-in. We did everything in-house except the cart paths.

We also struggled to find labor during the project. Next thing I know, there's a van full of Mexican workers that pulled over right off the highway. They brought 20 to 35 guys. I would have never, ever got this golf course built without those guys. They worked seven days a week, weather permitting. A couple of them still work for us.

It's like Texas hold 'em poker: Every time I got down to my last card, I rolled a flush on the river. I'm so lucky that I got a chance to do this and didn't go broke.

Q What makes the course different?

It's a great golf course and a great value. We've never heard we have 'Mickey Mouse' holes or it's unfair. The general golfing public likes us. You can't buy that, you have to earn it.

Q You still do marketing to attract play though?

We advertised on radio, in print and on TV to attract golfers that first time. We collect e-mail addresses and make offers on the Web site. But, golfers' experiences are what keeps them coming back. We listen to people. You have to cater to your customers. People who blow smoke up your butt do you no good. We fixed many things on the course based on that input.

Initially, we had many complaints about yardage markers. So, we put in the Kirby markers and eliminated the complaints. Green speeds were also a little too low. Unfortunately, the average golfer judges golf courses by the speed of the greens ... even if they can't putt on them. Our greens are G-2 bentgrass. They're Ferrari greens, but we manage them cautiously because we also want keep up speed of play.

If I had to sum up why average golfers like us, it's because we give them a fair round of golf. There are no blind shots. People don't leave unhappy about surprises. If you don't

give the people what they want, you're going to go broke. They want lush conditions, they want fast greens, and they want to be able to find their ball. They don't like unplayable golf courses where you're constantly looking for lost balls. Right now, we're spending the money to clean out areas that slow down play and frustrate golfers.

Q Was the course meant to be an anchor for real estate?

That wasn't part of the plan at all. I just wanted to build the best course I could. But I recently sold part of the adjacent property to Ryan Homes and it is putting in 265 units.

Q How did you set your price point?

We never did a marketing analysis or anything like that. I had no numbers at all. I had purchased the land free and clear and put a couple of million dollars of my own into it. Then I borrowed another \$2.5 million to finish.

The one thing I knew was the general public can't afford \$150 per round – that's Economics 101. Also, I wasn't in this to make a lot of money. Then, a few days before we were set to open, I read an article in *Golf* magazine that suggested \$68 per round was about the maximum an average golfer would pay. So we stuck with that. Now, we're doing 20,000 to 25,000 rounds per year at about \$60 per round average.

Q What kind of play do you get?

We get many customer golf. We get many guys that decide if they're going to play somewhere outside their club, they want to come here. We also get many guys who've dropped out of private clubs.

We don't do many big outings. We stay busy enough with our tee sheet. We have that luxury.

Q You did some things structurally that are different than most facilities. How did you come to design the set-up that way?

When I laid out the range, I eliminated steps to reduce labor. The way we're set up in the pro shop, it takes a total of two or three people to run the entire clubhouse. We could write the book on lean golf management. We have no budget. We just spend as little as we can.

For grow-in, I bought used equipment – it's going to be destroyed in the process anyway. When you're done, you don't feel like you've wasted it. One of the biggest mis-

takes made by new golf courses is buying \$500,000 worth of new equipment that's going to get trashed.

We bought our equipment and carts versus leasing. My background is accounting. We can write those off effectively. We get five years of use out of the carts. After five years, they're still worth \$1,500 each. I'm only down a little at that point. And I've paid the equivalent of the lease costs and still have the down payment on new carts. We pay cash for everything and buy used equipment whenever we can.

It goes back to my Italian family roots. We say, 'There's the right way, the wrong way and the Italian way.' We do things a little differently.

Q What do you like most about your business?

I'm lucky we don't have a budget, and there are no committees or any of that junk. Also, the opening of the course was just the beginning. Now, we're dressing things up and constantly adding new features. That's fun.

This course is a legacy to my family. Plus, I always wanted to do it. We've been a great nation and every generation has given more than it's taken. When I leave I want this to be a public golf course that every one can enjoy and afford. It's my contribution back to the game and society.

Q What trends in the industry do you lose sleep about?

Most operators aren't looking at simple economics. We've built too many courses and put too much financial pressure on operators, such as the changes in the tax laws, permitting costs, etc. Plus, Cleveland has changed. There are fewer big corporation headquarters and a lot fewer people with club memberships.

The whole lifestyle in America has changed and made the private country club a dinosaur. The stay-at-home mom isn't sitting around the club playing bridge all day long. The dad isn't playing golf and hanging around playing cards all night. No one hangs out at clubs like they used to. Also, there's been an explosion of restaurant options, and the elite dining concept that used to support clubs isn't in demand any more. It's an absolute waste.

Q You mentioned leaving a legacy behind when you're gone. How would you like your golf obituary to read?

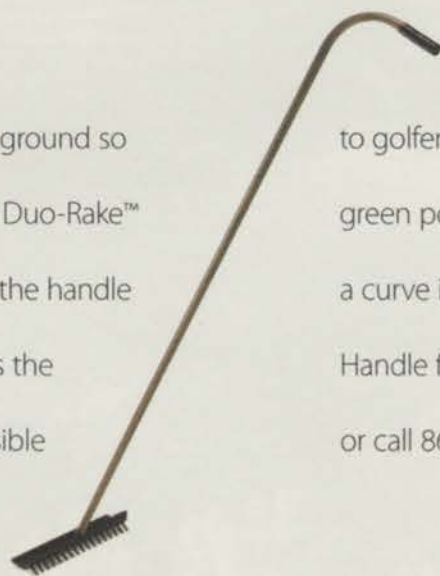
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AT A GLANCE

The Blackstone Course at Blackstone Country Club in Peoria, Ariz.

Owner: Sun Belt Holdings and Shea Homes

Architect: Jim Engh

Builder: American Civil Contractors

Golf course superintendent: Roger Brashear

Cost to build: \$9 million

Length: 7,089 yards

Par: 72

Number of holes: 18

Project started: Fourth quarter of 2003

Course opened: Fourth quarter of 2005

Turfgrass on greens: Tifeagle Bermudagrass

Turfgrass on tees and fairways:

419 Bermudagrass

The Blackstone Course at Blackstone Country Club was inspired by links courses in Ireland.

by JOHN WALSH

There were a couple of firsts involved with the development of the Blackstone Course at Blackstone Country Club in Peoria, Ariz. Golf course architect Jim Engh had never designed a golf course in the desert. Golf course superintendent Roger Brashear had never been the lead golf course superintendent during a grow-in. However, the experience of Denver-based American Civil Contractors and the fact that the company builds many of the courses Engh designs helped the project progress smoothly. Those involved say it turned out beautifully.

Out of the gate

Sunbelt Holdings, which partnered with Shea Homes to develop Blackstone, studied the marketplace diligently, says Mark Hammons, vice president of Sunbelt.

"With the entitlement we have, we're able to build five golf courses," he says. "We already built a public golf course and wanted to build a private one. We think we've created something that's not found in this valley with production homes, custom homes and a golf course."

Hammons says there aren't many golf clubs in the area at the Blackstone's price point, which is \$60,000 for a club membership. He says Arrowhead Country Club is probably the closest club in price to Blackstone, but it's an older facility. Quintero Country Club, about 20 miles northwest of Blackstone, is at the high end of the market.

"Those are the two extremes, and there was nothing in the middle," he says. "Blackstone is a home club. We are building custom homes for empty nesters and young people."

Moving forward with the golf course project, Sunbelt interviewed Engh and liked his philosophy of working within what the land presents.

Before working at Blackstone, Brashear was superintendent of the Cochise Course at Desert Mountain for about four years. He heard about Blackstone through Intrust Golf Management, which had contacted him about working at one of golf courses it manages, including one in Vistancia near the Blackstone site. Those courses didn't interest him, however, Brashear was interested in the Blackstone project because he had never been the lead superintendent during a grow-in and was excited to stay in Arizona.

Rick Maher, operations manager for ACC Golf, an arm of ACC, says the company was interested in the project for three reasons: (1.) Engh, with whom it had a good relationship, designed the course; (2.) working in Arizona in the winter is preferable; and (3.) Shea Homes and Sunbelt are big clients.

Design style

Sunbelt's management team, which includes several accomplished golfers, looked at the land and thought it would be developed into a normal desert golf course with carries, elevation changes, boulders and landscape creations.

"But when the management team started talking to Jim, and he said he had never done a golf course in the desert, management then said, 'We want something different,'" Hammons says. "There's criticism that a lot of golf courses out here are similar, but with Jim, the links style, greens design and bunkers (there are only 30 of them compared to 60 or 70 on a typical desert course) are different. He makes playing the course challenging but rewards you for thinking through the round. If you hit an errant shot, but get the distance right, you have the opportunity to make par."

Engh incorporated many natural features in his design. For example, there's a natural land berm blended into the eighth hole, and a green tucked in a cove surrounded by natural earth on the ninth. The site features many arroyos and drainage areas that Engh could capitalize on, allowing him to bring his style to the desert.

"I have a love for Ireland and using the land as it is, although I'm not afraid of creating things where nothing exists," he says. "I don't want repetition on the golf course."

Engh worked well within the land, which is part of his style, Hammons says.

"We moved between 200,000 and 250,000 cubic yards of dirt," he says. "It was kind of a clean slate in terms of the land and design, except for the 404 (permit) areas that run through the site."

On the site, 404 areas are dry streambeds deemed wetlands by the Army Corps of Engineers that can't be disturbed.

Other than the 404 areas, which were a constraint when designing the course, Engh says he was able to route the course where he wanted to. The 404 areas determined where some holes went. Some holes touched nothing and fit perfectly. Other holes were different. For example, Engh chose a flat



There are many areas of the golf course that didn't require grading.

area to put an irrigation pond and one hole wrapped around it with an Irish flair.

"We went through a selection process, so the owners knew the look they would get with us, and that allowed us to move forward without much interference," Engh says.

Being a desert course, a maximum number of acres of maintained turf—90—is part of the construction equation.

"We have really big landing areas, but there's no grassing around the tees and up to the fairways," Engh says. "The course is 7,089 yards from the tips, but additional length wouldn't change the number of maintained acres of turf. I design for a scratch player. The challenge is designing for the Tour players. For me, I cover 99 percent of golfers by designing for the scratch golfer."

"I became more bold and confident by understanding that one out of every five golfers won't like the layout, and that one person will be the most vocal," he adds.

Engh and Hammons prefer when a golf course superintendent is on site from day one, and Engh likes the superintendent to lay out the irrigation system. Brashear was there for that.

"He reviewed Jim's plans and offered suggestions from a maintenance standpoint,"

Photos by Joann Dost

Hammons says. "It was a great advantage to have Roger on that early."

Builder relations

Building in the desert can be tricky. Anything that's disturbed won't grow back, Maher says.

"We take the time and effort not to tear up any more than we have to," he says. "We're focused on minimal disturbance."

Other than running into hard ground and working in 110-degree temperatures, everything went smoothly, Maher says.

Engh was on site periodically, but during the shaping process and grassing, he was there more often. During construction, there weren't many change orders, Engh says.

"When we hit rock, there were change orders that needed to be made," he says. "We also added a few irrigation heads here and there."

Potential issues were addressed before they became problems, Maher says.

"Roger is the more-than-helpful type," he says. "He was there to solve problems, not create them."

Working with ACC was a positive experience for Hammons.

"They wanted to come to this market, so they were aggressive with their price," he says. "We were adamant about keeping the disturbance to the landscape outside the golf course to a minimum. They met the timeline. They held to their numbers. ACC knew Jim and his philosophy so there weren't many change orders, but there were many small changes that were absorbed in their daily operations."

Brashear also was pleased to work with ACC.

"We learned a lot from each other," he says. "Being my first golf course build, I was scared so bad because you have to do it right. It was up to ACC and me to make it happen."

Because the course is part of a master-planned community, it will be surrounded

by homes eventually. But, as of mid-September, none of the homes had been built yet, but lots have been sold.

Water supply

Water is always a concern when building a golf course, especially in the desert. Engh says the water set-up and delivery was already resolved before he arrived, which allowed him to focus strictly on the golf course. Sunbelt worked with the city of Peoria and the Central Arizona Project, a water provider. The property on which Blackstone sits is bisected by the CAP canal, which channels water from the Colorado River. Additionally, Blackstone has a wastewater plant that provides Class A effluent water.

"We have two lakes with effluent water, and we will wean ourselves off of the CAP as soon as possible, as we build more homes," Hammons says. "Out of every 100 gallons that goes into the treatment plant, 80 percent can be regained to go back into

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Selection and care

When building some courses, depending on location, the choice of what grasses to use can be daunting. But not for the Blackstone project. 419 Bermudagrass was used on the tees and fairways, and Tifeagle Bermudagrass was used on the greens. The varieties are typical grasses in the desert because they're durable and stand up to the weather. Because the greens' design and the weather, it would be difficult to grow bentgrass, Brashear says. There wasn't a lot of choice with the grass because of the greens' design and the desert location.

"We toyed with the idea of bentgrass greens but because of the heat, we decided it wasn't prudent," Engh says.

Brashear says Tifeagle makes for a perfect putting surface if it's verticut and topdressed regularly. He grooms the greens four times a week, verticuts once a week and brushes twice a week.

"Tifeagle is known for thatch, but if you don't deal with it every day you'll have problems."

The Blackstone project started late in 2003, and sprigging finished in September of 2004. Hammons says Sunbelt missed its marketing window but ended up with a year-and-a-half grow-in. The course, which is overseeded with ryegrass in the winter, is going through its first year of transition.

"Until we sell every house around here, we'll overseed," Brashear says. "There are a lot of benefits to not overseeding, but I understand why they want to do it."

Brashear says it takes a lot to maintain the course. For example, there's a lot of hand work needed around the bunkers because they're severe.

"As Jim once said, this course won't be low maintenance, but I'm 34 and am not looking for an easy course to maintain," he says. "When I'm 70 and still doing this, I'll be looking for the flattest course in Kansas. The course is hard to maintain, but it's fun. I haven't found anything to complain about. There are a few areas of the course that take more to maintain, but it's beautiful."

That's entertainment

Of the 20-plus projects Engh has worked on since starting his own firm in 1991, he says the desert setting makes this course stand out. A lot of roll into the greens, flat areas around those rolls, and several ways to look at shots onto the greens are a few of the aspects that differentiate Blackstone from other courses in the area.

"We brought our vision into a desert set-

ting," he says. "It's a golf course that looks like nothing else in the Phoenix Valley. There's a wide variety of randomness. You can play it 30 times, and still not figure it out. We're bold with our individual hole

characteristics.

"We're in the entertainment business," he adds. "If you look at it any other way, you're missing a large part of the business."

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Staying afloat

CAN ANY COURSE BE AN ISLAND UNTO ITSELF THESE DAYS?

by
JOHN
WALSH

It's the purest of golf development concepts: A course that's just a course. No houses, no business parks, no fancy hotel – just golf for golf's sake.

But the majority of the golf courses built nowadays are tied to real estate, whether it's residential housing or a resort. Home building accounts for about 70 percent of new courses coming on line, according to Henry DeLozier, v.p. of golf for Pulte Homes and president of the National Golf Course Owners Association board of directors. This is mainly because the number of rounds generated by stand-alone facilities – ones that aren't part of a residential or commercial development, owned by a municipality or part of a resort – simply can't cover the cost of building and operating them.

"The cost of construction is more than the number of rounds we're getting," says Joe Niebur, president of Colorado Springs-based Niebur Golf. "Golf courses need subsidies. The land cost is too much in highly populated areas. You need something else to carry the golf course."

As a result, fewer stand-alone golf courses are being developed. Those that are being built are the brainchildren of incredibly wealthy individuals or are located on unique pieces property.

"The economics aren't there anymore," says Mike Bylen, owner of three public stand-alone courses in suburban Detroit – Cherry Hills, Pine Trace and Shepherd's Hollow.

Bylen attributes the demise of stand-alones to oversaturated markets and the general economy. He says there were 42 upscale golf courses – most of them stand-alones – built in suburban Detroit between 1989 and 2001. Two have closed and three more are about to, he says.

"It's not like opening a coffee shop, where you can move to another corner if business is bad," he says. "You can't move a golf course. If you could, I would have done so already."

Nowadays, stand-alones are the exception, according to Steve Forrest, golf course archi-

tect with Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest and Associates. He says the decline of stand-alone courses started in 2000.

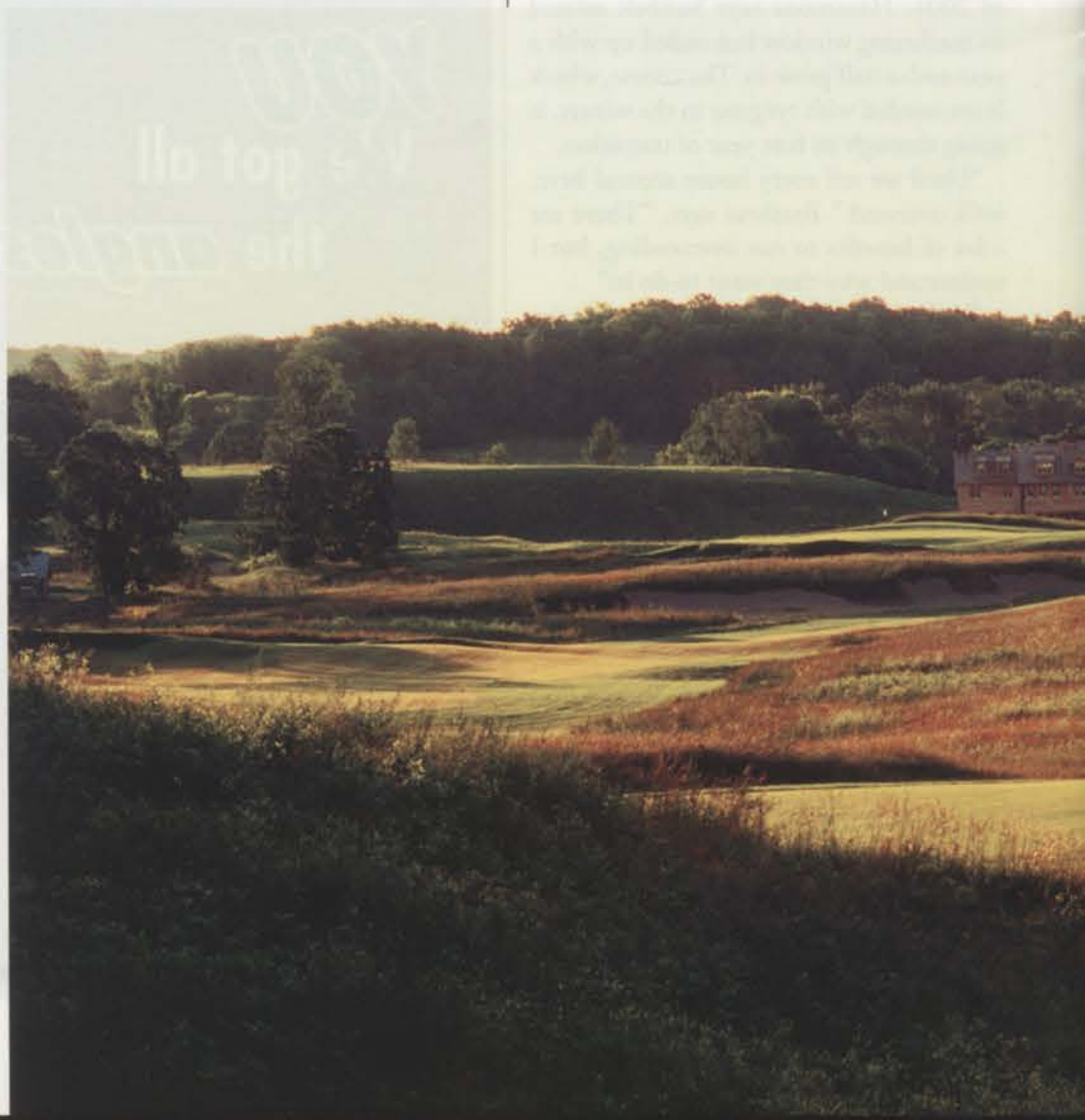
"It's hard to make money at a golf course," he says. "It's hard to get financing. It will take at least three years to get out of the red and into the black – that's the standard. Unless you're independently wealthy or use government funding to build a course, you won't see a stand-alone course be a big success. I would be surprised if stand-alone courses would be more than 10 percent of the market."

Everything in Scottsdale, Ariz.-based SEMA Golf's pipeline, including Mexico, is part of a residential development or a resort, according to president Bob Steele. Steele

says he has heard of a few stand-alones being built. The last course SEMA built that didn't have housing around it was part of the Desert Mountain Resort in Scottsdale, Ariz. There were five courses already and demand indicated a need for a sixth course.

"Unless it's a high-end private club that's funded through membership, golf courses will need residential development to be built," Steele says. "Still, there are some private exclusive clubs out there, but it's not feasible anymore to do those kind of private deals."

Niebur Golf currently has eight jobs under way, and none of them are stand-alones – all are tied to residential real estate or a resort. The last time Niebur built a



stand-alone golf course was Three Crowns in Casper, Wyo., which British Petroleum developed on a reclamation site. It opened in 2004.

From an architect's point of view, Forrest says stand-alones are the most desired type of course partly because the people building them usually want the best for the course.

"We're thrilled when we find them," he says.

Currently, of all the designs the Hills/Forrest firm is working on, two are stand-alone courses. One is being built in between Annapolis, Md., and Washington, D.C., by Albert Lord, vice chairman and c.e.o. of Sallie Mae. The course, called Anne Arundel Manor, will be built for Lord and 50 of his closest friends. Construction is scheduled to start in November. No market research was done for the project, Forrest says.

Another stand-alone course Hills/Forrest is working on is part of the state of Kentucky's golf trail in Yatesville State Park. It's called Eagle Ridge.

All of the golf courses Tripp Davis and Associates is designing are tied to real estate.

"Right now, I have five new projects, and they're all tied to residential real estate or a resort," says golf course architect Tripp Davis. "Golf courses that aren't tied to real

estate tend to be smaller, private high-end clubs. You don't see them often."

However, in the past six years, the firm has designed a couple stand-alones financed by private equity, most notably The Tribute in The Colony, Texas, and Clary Fields in Tulsa, Okla., which are both public.

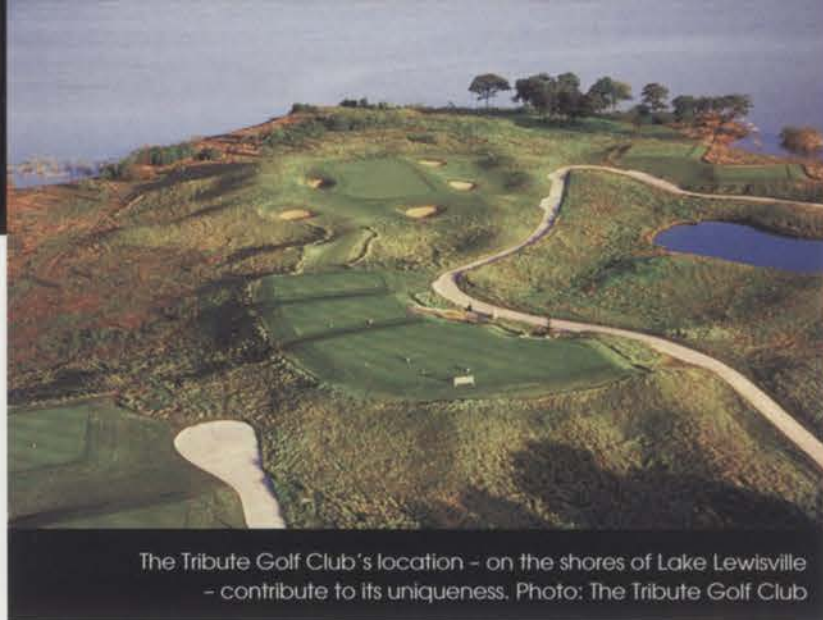
"When we designed them, we realized they needed to be profitable and unique," Davis says.

Making it work

For a stand-alone to be successful, it needs to be in a metro area and have the right demographics, Forrest says. As an example, the big three motor companies – Ford, General Motors and DaimlerChrysler – are located within 30 minutes of Bylen's three courses.

"The majority of our customers have a direct or indirect relationship with the Big Three," he says. "We book a lot of business because of them."

Davis says there are two keys to building sustainable stand-alones. First, there needs to be a new site that adds to the golf experience to make it a unique concept. For example, you don't want a flat site with a lot of rock and no ambiance. And second, you need to take a minimalistic approach



The Tribute Golf Club's location – on the shores of Lake Lewisville – contribute to its uniqueness. Photo: The Tribute Golf Club

to designing the course because you need to build it as cost efficiently as possible.

The Tribute Golf Club and Clary Fields Golf Club fit those requirements, according to Davis. The Tribute is on a unique site – the shores of Lake Lewisville. The design is considered a "dream 18" because the holes are based on concepts found in Scotland and have the ambiance of links land. Other aspects that make it different include:

- The director of golf is from Scotland;
- Bag pipes play through speakers;
- The flags are five feet instead of the standard seven and a half feet; and
- It's maintained to play hard and fast.

Clary Fields came about because a guy in Tulsa who loves to golf was having difficulty reserving tee times at the local public course, so he built his own.

Since Erin Hills opened Aug. 1, business has been good for owner Bob Lang, who isn't trying to generate as many rounds of golf as possible in order to give golfers an uncrowded experience. Photo: Paul Hundley





Among his projects, Steve Forrest is designing two stand-alone golf courses. Photo: Forrest/Hills & Associates

“What made this project work was that there was a water source close by and the soil was sandy,” Davis says. “We built the course for less than \$2.5 million.”

The course breaks even at 22,000 rounds per year when most similar public courses would need 30,000 rounds to break even, Davis says.

Another example of a stand-alone that has unique aspects is Erin Hills in Hartford, Wis. It will host the 2008 USGA Women’s Amateur Public Links, which it was awarded while under construction. It was designed in the fashion of Old Tom Morris because very little dirt was moved during construction.

“There was only one hole where we lifted the green,” says owner Bob Lang. “Everything else was cored into the ground.”

Lang, a builder, has a different philosophy about golf carts. He claims the only modern aspect of the golf experience at the public Erin Hills is the electric golf carts. There are no continuous cart paths, and fewer golfers means fewer carts, which is better for the fescue grass, which can’t withstand a lot of cart traffic.

Performance

So if other forms of real estate help golf courses financially, how are the stand-alones performing without that component? Nationally, rounds at the real estate/resort courses have increase 3.5 percent this year compared to last, according to the National Golf Foundation. Rounds at stand-alones have increased 2.7 percent this year compared to last.

Right now, it seems Erin Hills is doing well after its Aug. 1 opening.

“I’m getting so many calls,” Lang says. “The USGA is coming back to evaluate the course, but the decision hasn’t been made about whether the U.S. Open will be played here in the future. David Fay is looking at it. When we opened, we received unexpected national attention, and as a result, it gives you the expectation this course is really good.”

Lang’s goal is for Erin Hills to become a destination golf course. So far, he’s booked tee times from golfers from more than 20 states. He’s also receiving more tee times from Illinois golfers than he expected. During August and September, the course was averaging 80 to 90 golfers a day.

“We do no advertising,” he says. “There’s so much awareness now, we’re getting repeat business.”

Lang says he has bookings all throughout October, but the course will probably close in early November.

“We’re not taking tee times for next year,” he says. “We’re trying to figure a budget for next year.”

For Lang, the fewer tee times the better, which isn’t normal for most public golf courses. He says tee times are going off every 10 minutes, but he’s only allowing five per hour, holding one.

“We’re trying to create a unique golf ex-

perience,” he says. “It’s about getting away in a natural setting. We want to provide an uncrowded golf experience.”

Fewer tee times means less revenue, which makes it challenging for Lang, who wants to keep the bank happy, the course fluent and the golfers happy.

Lang’s goal this year is to generate 5,000 rounds at \$150 a round. By the first full week of September, Erin Hills had generated about 3,000 rounds.

Being a highly-rated new course helps business, but how long will the buzz last?

“I’ve asked people, and they say look to the third season as the top-out year,” Lang says.

But Lang, who’s the sole owner of the course with a very supportive bank, doesn’t want to generate 22,000 rounds a year. He says 10,000 to 12,000 is ideal, but 14,000 to 18,000 is more realistic financially.

(continued on page 49)



Being a highly rated new course, as well as receiving attention from the U.S. Golf Association, is helping business at Erin Hills. Photo: Paul Hundley