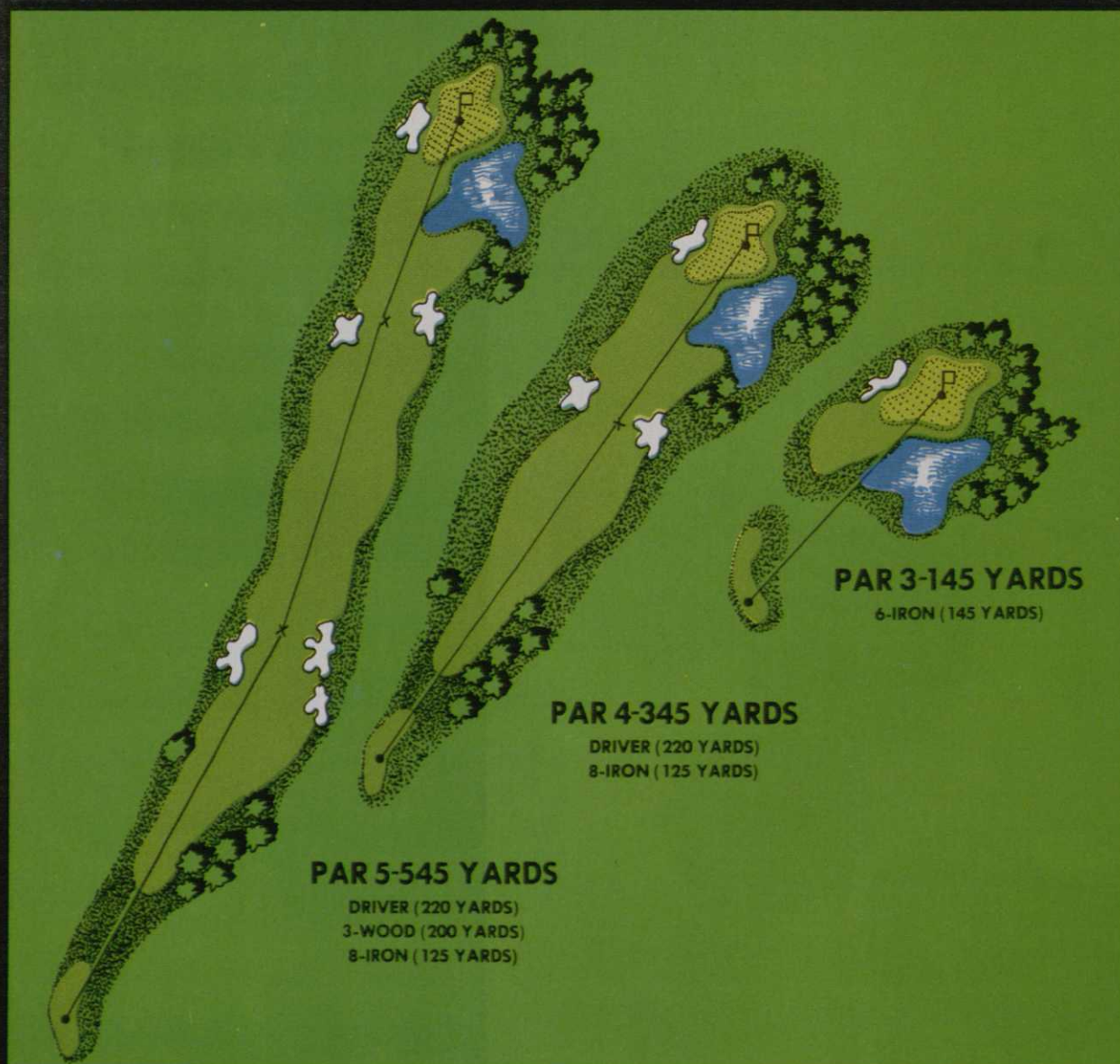


# EXECUTIVE COURSES: ANSWERING THE SPACE SQUEEZE

Construction of executive courses as a means of retaining golf in high-population areas is a growing trend in the golf industry. These challenging courses can be a revenue-producing part of a green belt program

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How can the golf industry prevent the demise of urban golf courses and keep them in the cities? One answer starts with the concept of the executive (middle-length) golf course.

In the past golf courses have been lumped into two general categories. The regulation course usually stretches 6,000 to 7,000 yards for 18 holes with par from 68 to 73. The non-regulation course, the par three, has all, or most of the holes par threes.

The executive course is an amalgamation of both. Combining the best features of both regulation and non-regulation, the executive course derived its name from the theory that a busy executive could play a round faster at a shorter course than on a regulation layout. The executive course has some par three holes, some par fours, rarely a par five. Par for nine holes may total 28 to 33, or 55 to 67 for 18. Yardage for 18 holes usually ranges between 3,500 and 5,000 yards.

Latest statistics from the National Golf Foundation reveal that the United States has at least 278 separate executive courses, plus 75 additional executives attached to regulation courses. The

353 total—103 are 18 holes—compare with 1,122 par three layouts and 11,174 nine and 18 hole courses. Of the 353 executive courses, 222 or 63 per cent are privately-owned daily fee types. There are 88 with private memberships—30 of those added to regulation courses—and 43 municipal. Although still small, the trend is building. Ten years ago hardly anyone had seen an executive course. NGF first listed them as a separate category in 1971. A staff member there admits there are more executive courses than listed, but precise yardage-par information on many courses is not available.

Executive courses are mostly found near cities where land is expensive and scarce, or around resorts. California leads with 60, New York has 24, Florida 22, Illinois 21, Pennsylvania 20 and Arizona 16. But five states including Alaska have none, and six states have only one each.

In Colorado, for example, the executive course was unknown until 1966. The city of Pueblo had an old 18-hole municipal course that was too short and tight. So a new regulation nine was added to the best existing nine, and the remaining nine holes were reworked into a par-30 "short" nine. Colorado, like California, Florida and Arizona, is a hot market for golf courses with in residential-resort developments. Several such communities will soon have executive courses. A par-32, 2,200 yards, will open in 1973 at Heather Ridge, an apartment community in suburban Denver.

Haystack Mt. Ranch GC has been a successful case history. Located five miles out from a small city, off the main highway, the business struggled at first. But now play averages 1,000 rounds a week in summer, over 20,000 rounds annually. The course has nine holes, par 32, 2,153 yards. Five holes are over 275 yards in length. Green fees are \$1.50 for nine and \$2.25 for 18, and \$3.25 all-day weekdays. On weekends the green fees are \$2 for nine holes, \$3

for 18 holes and \$4 for all-day.

Owner-builder C.J. "Bud" Ebel Jr. now knows the concept was sound. He wouldn't do anything differently. "We appeal to probably 90 per cent of all players," Ebel says. "Beginners, women and children like it—the length makes it fun, so golfers aren't all pooped out when they get home. Even the better golfers come out to brush up on their accuracy and short game. Our length is not too long for women, or too short for most men."

Meanwhile, the extra nine holes at Pueblo's City Park GC is also proving its appeal. Play was over 20,000 rounds in 1969, but leaped to almost 30,000 rounds in 1970 and about 35,000 in 1971.

NFG reports another successful case is the nine-hole Ken Lock Golf Links, Lombard, Ill. Now in its 10th season, the business has shown increases every year, up to about 40,000 rounds annually. Nearly half the play is by women and junior golfers. The course covers 33 acres, playing 1,629 to 1,840 yards off tees averaging 30 yards in length.

The father-son owners are the only year-round staff. They have two men on golf course maintenance and two assistants in the clubhouse during the golf season. Total cost of development was about \$175,000, including land. Annual operating budget is only \$35,000.

Popularity with the golfers and economic return determine the feasibility of any golf course. The key question is how much money can an executive course save and/or make over a regulation course? No two situations are alike, of course, but let's use some typical figures and compare two theoretical courses that might be built and operated at the same site.

The regulation 18 in an urban area might use 150 acres of land, if that amount of land can be found. Say it costs for argument's sake \$1,000 an acre. Construction, with design fees and equipment, plus clubhouse, could easily total \$600,000. The total investment for

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*The three illustrations (left) depict a golf hole design as interpreted for a regulation, executive and par-three golf course, respectively. The executive course offers a compromise between the challenge of the regulation course and the space conservation of the par-three course. The hole for the executive here requires the accurate placement of the tee shot between two bunkers with a finesse shot into the green just as the regulation course would. Only the fairway wood has been eliminated. The hole design for the par-three course is similar around the green, but does not give the golfer the opportunity to use a variety of clubs.*

*(Design by The Purdys, golf course architects, Livingston, N.J.)*



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For the executive 18, you can probably do the job with 75 acres. Land cost would be half as much in a comparable urban area. If the same 150 acres were purchased, the remaining 75 acres could be sold or developed at a profit.

In construction, quality should be equal, but quantity is different. Because the area is smaller for the executive course, you should save at least 25 per cent in earthwork and 40 per cent in clearing, irrigation and seeding. You can also save approximately 10 per cent for equipment and maintenance. Total investment in an executive course, plus clubhouse, would be about \$520,000 versus the \$750,000 for the regulation course. Plus you still have the profit from development of the extra land. Either might be built for less, of course, with lower quality construction, partial irrigation systems and smaller clubhouses.

Operationally, a good executive 18 in a metropolitan or resort market should net more than a full-size course. Green fee charges for a good layout can be as high. More players can move around faster. Result: More rounds per day during peak periods, more green fee income, more time for golfers to hit practice balls and patronize the pro shop and clubhouse.

Maintaining the shorter course is cheaper, easier and faster. Greens and tees need the same care as on a regulation course, but there may be only 50 to 60 per cent as much fairway to water, fertilize and mow. That requires less labor, water and supplies. The executive course maintenance budget ought to be at least 20 per cent lower. They may still hire Golf Course Superintendent Assn. of America members to keep the course in top shape.

Most other operating budget items won't change much. But one notable exception is property taxes. Less land used means lower taxes, a major expense for most regulation courses.

Many golf business authorities have recently offered endorsements of the executive course and its advantages. Don Rossi, executive director of NGF, says, "This is

a developing trend that will have an impact on the industry. Shorter courses require less land; construction and maintenance costs are lower, and then there's the big factor of less playing time. More players shoot in the 70s and 80s on these courses, a big boost to their morale. Their feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment couldn't be achieved on a regulation course."

Richard Phelps, golf course architect, Phelps-Brauer & Associates, says, "The executive course fills a real need in many new recreational developments. Land costs mean some owners can't or won't give enough space for a regulation course. With more par-three holes, we can possibly use rougher sites to build on. Most golfers like more par-three holes—they can see the green and know they have a better chance to reach it and make par."

William Roach, past president of the National Club Assn. and developer of The Mill River Club, Oyster Bay, N.Y., says, "Aside from the attractive economics of construction and maintenance costs, the per-capita cost of operating a private club can be considerably reduced. Faster rounds mean heavier play and thus larger memberships and better support of bar and dining facilities. They also tend to be 'walking courses' and could very well restore the game's status as an exercise and health-giver."

"The vast majority of private or semi-private clubs have financial problems that can be corrected by getting away from the outmoded premise that the course must be long and tough," Jim Lamont, editor of the Florida Golfer, says. "Financial support comes from an average golf age that has little or no enjoyment in playing par-four holes that require three shots to hit the green and par-five holes that run over 500 yards."

So the case for the executive course is strong. For the ownership—cheaper to build, more profit potential. For the golfer—faster play, lower scores. Golf needs such progressive ideas because it is now big business and belongs to the masses. Look for the executive course trend to grow in the 1970s and beyond.