

The municipal golf situation in this country stinks. In the past 10 years, the number of qualified superintendents and the possibilities for improved maintenance make it unacceptable for some of these courses to look the way they do.

Granted, there has been improvement at some facilities, but most cities haven't a clue what their classically designed golf courses once looked like or how they could provide better conditions. Many never will understand until they get some financial help.

There are hundreds of great old municipal courses designed by the likes of A.W. Tillinghast, Donald Ross, Alister MacKenzie, George C. Thomas and others that are poorly maintained. Worse, their architecture has taken a beating. They should be golf courses that everyone wants to play — like Bethpage State Park's Black Course (*see story on page 39*) — but are laughingstocks instead.

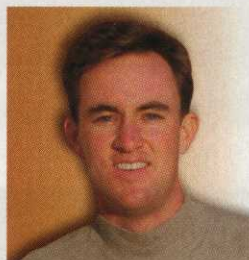
Well-intentioned programs like the First Tee are more feel-good public relations/tax write-off opportunities for corporations to claim they're doing work for inner-city kids. They serve a purpose by getting kids started playing golf and assisting other disadvantaged youths. But restoring existing municipal golf courses would not only take advantage of quality facilities that already have infrastructures, but also provide quality places for beginners and advanced players to pursue the game. Interesting architecture breeds passion for the game.

A First Tee course may get kids started playing, but where do the same kids move on to when they're beyond the beginner stage? And how about the everyday beginners who want to keep playing but can only afford the local municipals?

The question is who will pay for restoration of the classic municipal courses. Who will guide the courses to the promised land? After all, Palmer Management and Kemper Sports have tossed in the towel with San Francisco and its moronic mayor, who is owned by the local unions. The USGA, which helped finance the Bethpage Black project, and the PGA Tour seem interested in revitalizing municipal

Restore Public Golf Courses — Now

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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courses only if there are big checks in it for them. In the USGA's case, it will be big bucks generated from next year's U.S. Open.

With a sizeable chunk of change in the bank and apparently no desire to use it to ward off litigious equipment companies, the USGA should look into a permanent loan program that is not necessarily tied to a major event. It should consider loans or incentive programs to municipalities that show a desire to rejuvenate their classic facilities. The Green Section is in place to help the agronomic side, and there are plenty of architects looking to do some good in their neighborhoods.

Like the trend of new retro ballparks that have helped return fans to baseball games, bringing back interesting design features will endear these great old facilities to golfers. The positive energy will spread throughout the facility, the city or the county. Like Bethpage, it can make a difference if common sense is used.

In every survey, the National Golf Foundation keeps announcing the most effective methods to retain golfers and attract new ones, but the golf business is not listening. Lower-cost and alternative golf courses (par 3, executive, etc.) that take less time to play will grow the game, NGF says.

Golf needs to forget about growth and start worrying about keeping more players. Better maintained municipal courses with interesting designs are vital to retaining the 3 million golfers who quit the sport every year.

Is there enough common sense in the golf business to see that Bethpage-like projects can make an impact? Of course. Golf just needs a gentle helping hand. The USGA would be a great candidate to help — before it completely loses its credibility.

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