

Six weeks into his new job at the 18-hole Comanche Trail GC in Big Spring, Texas, Jack Birdwell trudged over to the trailer where he lived, sank down on its stoop and buried his head in his hands. He remembers thinking, "What in the world have I gotten myself into?"

Birdwell, Comanche's superintendent and pro shop operator, had left a good-paying job as superintendent at a course in Roswell, N.M., in 1997 to return to his Texas roots. In Roswell, he never worried about having enough employees or where the money would come from for maintenance. His \$400,000 budget amply met all his needs.

The city-owned Comanche, on the other hand, had a budget less than half that (\$168,000 his first year; it's now slightly more than \$253,000) and three employees. At the same time, West Texas hemorrhaged jobs during the economic downturn, reducing the number of people who could actually afford to play golf.

Still, Birdwell's optimistic outlook on his new job never wavered — until he arrived at the course. He was shocked and shaken by what he found there.

On his first day, Birdwell found an inoperable irrigation system, three pieces of 10-year-old turf equipment and fairways so dry the grass had died, leaving golfers to play on dirt. It would have been enough to break the spirit of Job.

"The first six months were a nightmare," Birdwell says. "There were times during that period when I thought I'd lost my mind in taking the job."

On top of everything else, the city refused to invest any money in the course. Desperately, Birdwell asked city council to guarantee it would invest whatever money the course made in his first year back into the golf course.

"They just laughed at me," Birdwell says. "Then they said, 'OK, and for every \$5,000 that you're over budget, you have to pay us back.' I agreed. What choice did I have?"

Undaunted, Birdwell worked to make a go of it. He saved money like a miser. When one of his three employees left for a better job,

Perseverance Spurs a Revival

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR.



BUT SIX WEEKS INTO HIS NEW JOB, JACK BIRDWELL REMEMBERS THINKING TO HIMSELF, "WHAT IN THE WORLD HAVE I GOTTEN INTO?"

Birdwell didn't replace him. He stopped fertilizing the fairways. He watered only greens (a process that took six hours every morning because his one well only pumped 250 gallons per minute).

But Birdwell must have done something right: At the end of the year, Comanche turned a \$12,000 profit. Per his agreement with the city council, the money went right back into the golf course — and Birdwell went on a spending spree.

"Well, not a spree exactly," Birdwell says, laughing. "I went to the bigger-budget courses and begged them to sell me some of their used equipment. The first time out, I bought two greens mowers and a spray rig. It was as if I'd won the lottery."

His predecessor had left him a two-year supply of chemicals, meaning Birdwell could spend the money on more pressing matters, like digging a second well (which freed him from paying the city for water and increased his irrigation-system capacity) and the equipment purchases. "Without the stockpile of chemicals, I don't know what I would have done," Birdwell says.

He also used inmate labor from the local prison to do manual labor like mowing rough and weed-eating, which freed up his staff to work on the irrigation system upgrade.

"I'm glad we explored that option when it was available," Birdwell says. "They helped us make significant improvements that are paying off now."

Birdwell's situation is hardly unusual. He says that in West Texas alone, there are 84 courses just like his, struggling to survive on a shoestring. But it's a tribute to the enduring spirit of the profession that Birdwell and all his low-budget course colleagues continue to press on, often making the best

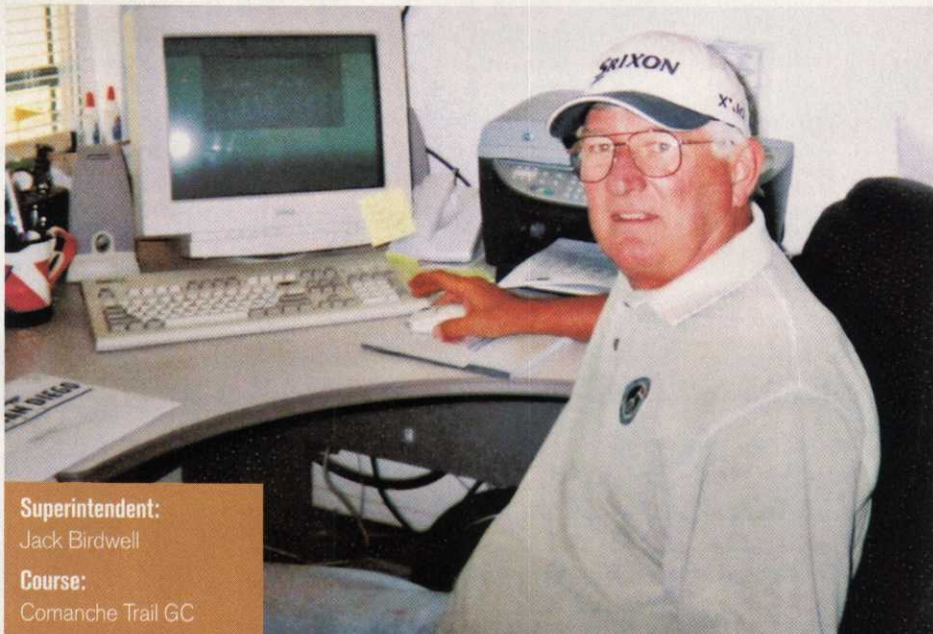
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Down and Dirty

Continued from page 82 of a bad situation. And in many cases, unlikely triumphs result.

Seven years after his disastrous beginning, Birdwell is proud to announce that the course expects to do 40,000 rounds (up from 28,000 in his first year) and the club will turn a profit of \$60,000 for the city of Big Spring. He says there's a lot more work to be done, but he's happy with the way everything turned out. The feeling of despair that once engulfed him has disappeared.

"It was a long hard struggle to make it work, but we're on the road back," Birdwell says. "I'm looking forward to staying here for years to come."



Superintendent:

Jack Birdwell

Course:

Comanche Trail GC

Location:

Big Spring, Texas

Maintenance budget:

\$253,000

Though Jack Birdwell despaired when he first arrived at Comanche Trail GC in 1997, he now has hope that things are moving in the right direction. His new computerized irrigation system helped turn the course around.

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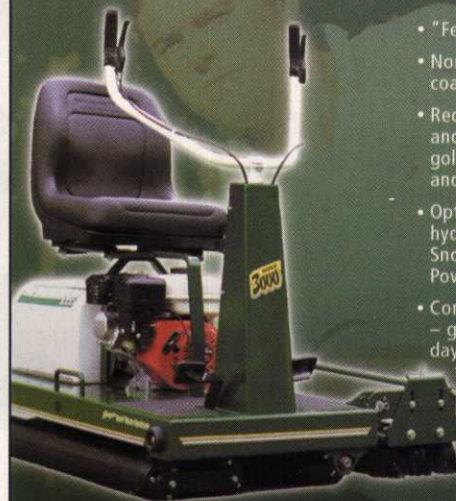
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