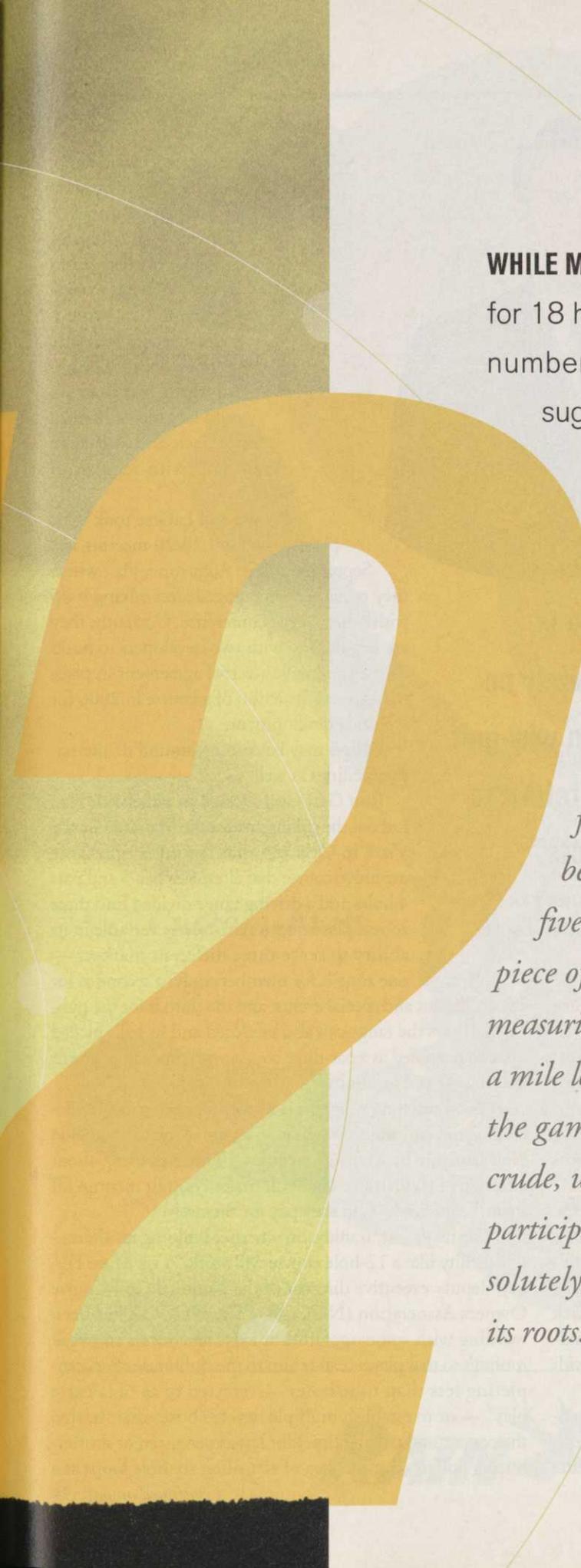


# Let's Play...

Architects and developers get serious about breaking from tradition to attract more golfers and pump life into the stagnant golf industry

BY BRUCE ALLAR





**WHILE MOST GOLF** traditionalists would argue for 18 holes and par of 71 or 72, a growing number of architects and developers are suggesting a new reading of the game's history. ● Here's course designer Michael Hurdzan in "Building a Practical Golf Facility," a book he wrote for the American Society of Golf Architects, questioning the pervasiveness of 18-hole layouts:

“ *These conventions evolved from a time when a golf course could be any number of holes, ranging from five or six up to 22 or more on any given piece of land, with the lengths of each hole measuring only a few yards up to holes almost a mile long. ... During those formative years, the game of golf, no matter how simple or crude, was available for the enjoyment of all participants at a reasonable cost. There is absolutely no reason why golf can't return to its roots.* ” ▶▶▶

*Continued from page 31*

And here's Don Knott of the California-based Knott Brooks Linn Golf Course Design Group, who has long been a proponent of out-of-the-box thinking: "Why, for example, must a course be 18 holes?" he's asked in an essay for Paul Daley's "Golf Architecture — A Worldwide Perspective, Volume II." "Either shorter courses and/or fewer holes may be necessary to keep the game both affordable and interesting."



### Doing something about it

Now a group calling itself Prestwick 12 Golf is doing more than talking about an alternative number of holes. It's proposing to design, build and provide operational strategies for investors interested in constructing 12-hole facilities. The brainchild of Mark Brown, who founded LINKS magazine, and Terry LaGree, the former chief operating officer of Black Diamond Ranch in Lecanto, Fla., the startup takes its name from Prestwick Golf Club, an early Scottish links course that originally had only 12 holes. (It hosted the first British Open in 1860, which went 36 holes.)

Brown, who left LINKS in 1995 to venture into course design and development, says he and LaGree were discussing the decline this decade in golf facility development. "We knew that golf had to go in a different direction to either grow or hold its own," he says. They came up with an alternative that Brown says will address the time constraints many players feel today, as well as the high-cost and difficulty-of-play factors that discourage many less-accomplished golfers.

"The idea isn't so much to grab people from other courses, but to create new golfers and to increase the number of rounds for them," Brown says. That market includes women, children and working persons who are able to spend two and a half hours on a course but not four or five hours. Prestwick 12 hopes to partner with homebuilders, particularly in middle-income developments with large numbers of families with young children or high concentrations of senior citizens.

"If there's going to be growth in the industry, it'll be in middle-class America," Brown adds. "We're almost trying to turn back the clock. When I grew up everybody walked, and the courses weren't quite so difficult."

**"There is absolutely no reason why golf can't return to its roots."**

**MIKE HURDZAN,**

GOLF COURSE ARCHITECT

The partners settled on 12 holes because of the historical identification with Prestwick Golf Club and because of designing issues. "We felt it wouldn't be hard to route a course to come back after six holes," Brown says. "Anything less than six would be kind of hard to route back and still have good golf with regulation holes."

Brown and LaGree took their plan to the Golf 20/20 meeting last September in St. Augustine, Fla., where they remained encouraged after talking it up with others at the conference. Currently, they are negotiating with two developers to build courses and have a verbal agreement in place to begin construction of a course in 2006 for a Florida development.

Others may be coming around to alternative facilities as well.

Ron Garl Golf Design in Lakeland, Fla., laid out the golfing areas at the Marriott Grande Vista in Orlando that feature a nine-hole executive course that alternates par-3 and par-4 holes and a driving range divided into three zones. The range is particularly versatile in its ability to serve three different markets — one zone is for members only; a second is for

private lessons and special events; and the third is for the public. Garl says the range can also be closed and its balls picked up, and reopened as a par-three course with nine target greens holding the pin locations.

A good teaching program is a must for such a facility, according to Garl, and the Grande Vista site is one of four Faldo Golf Institute by Marriott facilities. "The hard thing about alternative facilities is: Can you make enough income off them?" says Garl. "Can they pay for themselves?"

"The jury's out, frankly, on whether building an alternative facility like a 12-hole course will work," says Mike Tinky, deputy executive director of the National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA). The NGCOA has been working with some operators at existing courses to tweak routings so that players can return to the clubhouse after completing less than nine holes — referred to as "a la carte play" — or to establish multiple new tee boxes that shorten the course (and playing time) for less-experienced or shorter-hitting golfers. But the idea of returning six-hole loops as a

*Continued on page 34*



*Continued from page 32*  
design feature on new 18-hole courses also seems to be gaining currency.

"Some would think it's thinking outside of the box, but it's just responding to the needs of the golfers," Tinkey says. "But the devil is in the details: How do you manage that (fewer-hole) play in and amongst your traditional golfers?"

The idea of three six-hole "sides" might seem like a golf shop's booking nightmare. But Brown says a golf official at Sea Pines Resort explored the idea of crossing over tee-time sheets for him and found a way to schedule more "rounds" on an 18-hole layout divided by threes than on one divided by twos. Others, however, question how such a facility could be managed. Since most operators would not want to lose any full-round fees for reduced dollars from those playing just six or 12 holes, they question the potential for shorter rounds.

But nearly everyone agrees that options are great when they can be offered.

"We have always tried to get guys back to the clubhouse twice during a nine or three times during an 18," says Erik Larsen, executive vice president of Palmer Course Design in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla. One of the Palmer group's new projects — The Tribute in Redmond, Ore. — is expected to feature an extra returning hole on the front nine, either between three and four or between four and five.

"Most of the golf course industry is cognizant that play is down, and it's a time issue," Larsen says. "It's only smart business to offer a product that provides a solution to that problem."

**Terry LaGree (left) and Mark Brown head Prestwick 12 Golf, a new company that creates 12-hole courses.**

Larsen would like to see nine-hole rounds pushed more by the industry, but foresees a bit of a hard sell to a golfing public that has become so conditioned to think of the 18-hole experience. Developers are receptive to alternative routing ideas, according to Larsen, as long as

they don't sacrifice their main project goals — usually a housing development connected with a specific lifestyle and the need to sell a certain amount of real estate. So-called "butterfly nines," where holes are strung out with homes along both sides of them, are not conducive to additional routings back to the clubhouse. "It tends to work better in 'core' golf courses," Larsen says.

Bobby Weed, whose Weed Course Design is also located in Ponte Vedra Beach, agrees that, when possible, a core-routed, self-contained golf property should try to bring additional holes back to the clubhouse. One possibility is a spoke-like approach, with three six-hole sections going out from the center. Weed hasn't yet worked on a 12-hole or other reduced-hole layout, but he expects that to change.

"My opinion?" he asks. "I think I will be doing some in the future."

Key in his mind is quality. Noting that most par-3 and executive courses are put in as "an afterthought," Weed says the success of alternative facilities will depend on good planning and design, proper construction and excellent maintenance.

*Continued on page 36*

*Continued from page 34*

nance — in other words, the same ingredients that make the top 18-hole courses memorable.

“More and more private clubs that don't depend on housing would be better served by having more holes routed to the clubhouse,” Weed says. “Time is replacing money as the number one reason people aren't playing as much golf today. We all need to do a better job of promoting golf from a perspective of speed of play.”

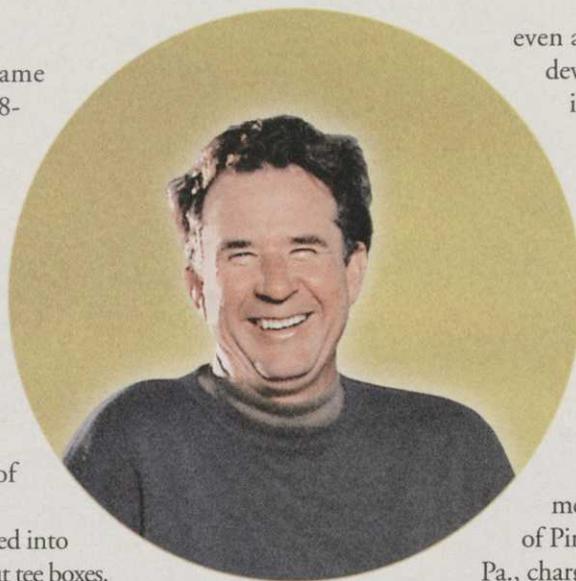
Weed Course Design has looked into another alternative: facilities without tee boxes. Particularly suited to smaller spaces where par 3's are installed, this type of course would encourage players to decide for themselves where they want to tee up, leaving exact yardage and angle to the pin in their hands. Weed is also brainstorming ideas with a condominium developer interested in golfing facilities on plots of just 10 to 30 acres. “If it promotes the game, introduces new players or provides recreation — and it helps builders or developers get their projects approved — it's all a win-win,” he says.

Don Knott recently designed an 18-hole course in Dublin, Calif., that plays to a par 63 and measures 4,900 yards from the back tees. Dublin Ranch, opened in 2004 in the Bay Area, fills a need for golf-hungry residents in a heavily populated market. The developers liked this shorter course because it didn't eat up as much of the real estate that they could sell for \$300,000 a lot for housing. And many golfers enjoy it because they can walk, rather than ride, and finish in three hours.

Dublin Ranch has only five par 4's along with two par 5's and 11 par 3's. The par 3's range from 140 yards to 240 yards and take advantage of the terrain for numerous elevation changes. It's a public track. “I think we're a ways from such a concept at a private course,” Knott says.

Knott's take on the time issue is that it can be traced directly to yardages. As the standard length has risen to 7,000 yards and beyond, most players have suffered — and suffered longer. “The average golfer should be playing approximately 2,000 fewer yards to hit the same clubs as the pros,” Knott says. “We're playing holes that are too long, which is frustrating and takes too much time. And then a lot of people are giving up the game.”

He sees the logic of laying out three six-hole sections or



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even a 12-hole course as ways to keep development costs down, lower playing costs and attract new golfers. “I think there would be plenty of people who'd be willing to play 12 holes of golf,” he says, noting that the game didn't start out as an 18-hole adventure. The nine holes out and nine holes in at St. Andrews eventually became the standard, but creative alternatives may appear to be on the rise.

John Baker, an NGCOA board member and co-owner with his wife of Pinecroft Golf Course in Ridgebury, Pa., charges \$1 a hole (or \$2 with cart) for time-stressed players on the public facility. He has identified 10 different combinations of alternate “rounds” totaling less than nine holes at Pinecroft. Able to see eight of the greens from the clubhouse, Baker sends “a la carte” golfers out to fill in the gaps in holes whenever the course isn't jammed with full-round players, who pay \$20 without carts on weekends. He asks only that the short-rounders not jump in front of those playing the entire track. The course does 11,000 rounds to 15,000 rounds per year and Baker estimates that up to 600 of them are by those playing less than nine holes.

“I send them out and tell them to pay when they get done,” he says. “We can't have the fastest greens or the plushiest fairways. The one thing we can be is the friendliest golf course in town. The trouble with the golf industry is:

On 90 percent of the courses, if someone with no experience walks in, they get sent away.”

The Prestwick 12 concept also caters heavily to inexperienced golfers as well as time-starved ones, offering plans to develop learning and practice facilities as a way to make the game less intimidating. Brown and LaGree say they can construct a 12-hole course along with a maintenance facility, modest clubhouse and golf shop for \$3.5 million if land costs are not involved. Describing likely designs as “strategic,” they say the courses would feature wide fairways and some risky routes for better players, plus green speeds in the 8- or-9 foot range.

“We probably won't get the top players on a regular basis, but it'll be fun and a good enough test for just about any amateur golfer,” Brown says. ■

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