

# A Public Service

Architects and turf consultants can renew the industry's image by sprucing up tattered municipal golf courses

An architect considered a master of his profession designed the courses, but you wouldn't know that by looking at the layouts today. And making the decrepit state of the facility even more unbearable is the creation of a wonderful golf academy just down the street designed to inspire underprivileged kids to take up the game. How can they be inspired when they drive by a once-grand municipal only to see it in such sorry condition?

This sad tale can be repeated throughout America, where the likes of Donald Ross, A.W. Tillinghast, Alister MacKenzie, Devereux Emmet, Walter Travis, George Thomas, Billy Bell and even Stanley Thompson designed municipal courses.

In fact, for as long as I've been around the game, the American municipal course has been synonymous with spotty conditioning, uninspired architecture and, often times, an utter embarrassment considering the financial resources sometimes poured into these facilities.

Go to any major city and it would be a shock to find the local city-run course in fine condition or with its architecture shining brightly.

Yet, nothing is more important to the future well-being of the game than public golf. These courses are the training grounds of future players, while also serving as reasonably priced facilities for retirees and avid golfers.

The neglect of these courses could so easily be abated with some tender-loving consultation

By Geoff Shackelford  
Contributing Editor

**T**here's a 36-hole, city-owned and operated facility in my hometown that has withered under lousy conditions ever since I played high school matches there 20 years ago. The architecture is even more tired, with the only semblance of care shown for it coming in the form of novelties like "water bunkers" added by local parks and recreation armchair architects.

PHOTO BY: ISTOCK INTERNATIONAL INC. (LEFT); PHOTO COURTESY: MOSHOLU GOLF COURSE (RIGHT)



from America's architects and turf consultants.

Sure, there are examples in some cities of local country club superintendents helping out the nearby muni, and examples here and there of architects doing good deeds, such as architect Steve Smyers spearheading a First Tee project in his hometown. But without the Public Works Administration-funded projects that got the attention of the Rosses and Tillinghasts of the world, consultation at full-length munis has been almost non-existent.

Still, what better way for architects to make the game better than by consulting at their local public courses?

The benefits are obvious. Beyond providing a public service, architects who help out at their towns' munis will reap some positive publicity. If they do a good job, they will assuredly cover the cost of their time by picking up more work as a result of their efforts.

And it turns out, the architects are willing. They just need to be asked and thrown a few concessions.

According to Chad Ritterbusch, executive director of the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA), most architects are just waiting for the phone to ring.

"As architect John LaFoy has said to me, 'I am always surprised that local golf folks, both private and public, will not call architects when they need help (because they) have no funds to pay,'" Ritterbusch says. "I am always willing to help at some level without being paid if they can't afford it."

The ASGCA has done its part to get the word out. More than 15,000 copies of its guide, "Building a Practical Golf Facility," have gone out to municipal officials through the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) and the Association of City and County Officials.



The ASGCA also exhibits and provides speakers to the NRPA conference each year.

Architect Greg Martin has worked on several public golf projects, including a restoration of Phillips Park in his hometown of Aurora, Ill. He has also performed work pro bono with the Chicago public schools, where he built a small golf course on land next to a school. He says changes in golfer and industry expectations make the architect's job tougher when recommending even the most basic design improvements.

"The golf industry is full of courses that are oversized and not sustainable," Martin says. "Unfortunately, golf course design continues to react to industry trends rather than establish them, and this will have dire consequences."

Architects must do more to convince ownership — specifically municipalities — about practical golf course design, as well as deliver a viable golf experience to a reluctant audi-

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**Mosholu Golf Course in the Bronx, N.Y., is a perfect example of a municipal course that was injected with new life — in this case turned into a First Tee facility.**

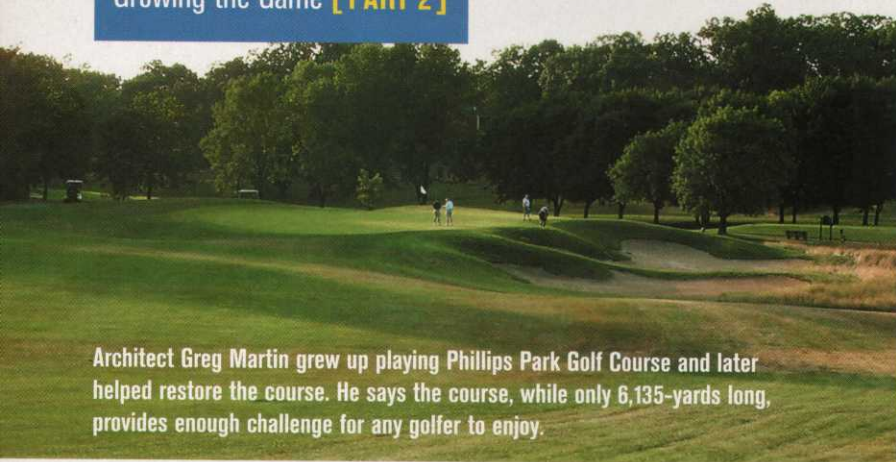
**[ABOUT THIS SERIES]** "Growing the Game," a four-part series that will appear in *Golfdom* throughout 2007, focuses on how the golf industry can attract more new players and create more rounds. In addition to this story on what golf course architects can do in their designs to make the game more friendly for beginner and average golfers, we'll also report on what industry companies are doing to grow the game. In the final installment of the series, we'll single out some of the more creative golf courses in the country and discuss the marketing programs they've implemented to attract new golfers. Part one of this series, which appeared in the February issue, reported on the impact that baby boomers could have on increasing play.

Visit our archives at [www.golfdom.com](http://www.golfdom.com) to view the 2006 "Growing the Game" series.

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Architect Greg Martin grew up playing Phillips Park Golf Course and later helped restore the course. He says the course, while only 6,135-yards long, provides enough challenge for any golfer to enjoy.

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**TOM DOAK**

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ence, Martin says. This means lower budgets, less ego and shorter, more playable designs.

"This challenge is immense, but it is necessary for this game and industry to grow," he says. "The growth of the game is contingent upon sustainable economics, accessibility, playability and community acceptance."

While architect Tom Doak is becoming associated with high-end, architecturally supreme projects in hard-to-reach locations, he continues to ponder ways to help golf at its most basic and important level.

"I think it's a great idea for more architects to get involved in municipal golf courses," Doak says. "It wouldn't be bad for some of the turf consultants to get involved, too; that would probably go further in making the golf experience better without added cost than, say, an architect suggesting places to put new bunkers 290 yards off the tee."

Still, Doak has contemplated other ways to give back. "We've explored having a separate division of the company to do lower-budget projects, but it's tough to find those projects anymore," he says. "Most of the affordable golf courses in America are the ones that have previously gone under, so the current owner's capital investment is low."

An exciting and potentially precedent-setting project will be carried out by Doak's Renaissance Golf Design team at the Colorado Golf Association's new home course, a former Air Force base layout named Mira Vista. Money is being raised to improve the course's architecture while maintaining a green fee near the current \$29. With associates Jim Urbina and Eric Iverson living in the area, the Renaissance team hopes to not only create a course with enhanced conditioning, but

it also hopes to raise the architectural bar.

"My associates have been concerned for some time that most of our clients are building exclusive private venues where [even they] would not otherwise be welcome, and that our fees are getting out of the range of the public sector," Doak says. "So we had been looking for a project where we could give something back."

Architect Brian Curley, who designed and helped develop Southern California's immensely popular but still affordable Goose Creek, would love to be involved with the restoration of a public course. But he says architects need a few concessions to encourage their involvement.

"I would want to work at a conceptual level and avoid the hand-holding that eats up so much time, especially with government," Curley says.

He says he believes most architects have avoided practical public course restorations because of liability concerns, particularly with cart path issues.

"It would be ideal to have a contractor involved early and avoid the bidding process, which gets time consuming and requires extensive working drawings, but most often a city would not be able to do this," Curley says.

Dave Axland, an architect with Dan Proctor who designed two of America's finest affordable designs (Wild Horse in Nebraska and Delaware Springs in Texas), offers a few suggestions for any municipality thinking about such a project.

"Locate an experienced designer who is willing to work with a local contractor," Axland says. "Provide one key artistic person to the team. Do this work in conjunction with the existing maintenance team. Do not reshape the site. Focus efforts on tees, bunkers, and greens. Appreciate the value and fun associated with contour, as it is cost effective. And use an independent agronomist familiar with United States Golf Association specs, but who is not locked into this formula."

Axland says there are countless public courses waiting for rejuvenation, but decision makers quite often don't do much homework.

"Sometimes I think that people do more research when shopping for a new car than they do before spending a million bucks on a golf course upgrade," he says. ■