



THE PRACTICE COURSE

By Derek J. VanDamme

Editor's Note: Derek J. VanDamme runs VanDamme Golf, a golf course design and construction company based in Sun Prairie, WI. He gained valuable experience working at various golf courses during expansion, addition, renovation, restoration and new construction projects. He is a University of Wisconsin-Madison graduate and has written other pieces for The Grass Roots.

While visiting my hometown of Superior, WI in the fall of 1996 I met up with the general manager of Nemadji Golf Club, Mark Carlson.

Mark was bringing me up to speed on all of the new developments at the course and some of the problems they were having. Due to the superior playing conditions at Nemadji, in comparison to surrounding courses, they were being overwhelmed with play.

Additionally, there had been a dramatic rise in junior and beginner participation, not only at Nemadji, but nationwide. These factors were slowing play to a dreadful pace for the regular players and negatively impacting revenue on weekends.

He asked me if I could put a 6-acre parcel of land in the middle of the existing 36 holes into a production that would help solve the problem of course crowding and slow play. He had seen several practice courses at the different golf courses he visited over the years and hoped this would be an affordable way to use the land with their limited capital budget of \$50,000 for 1997.

The Plan

The site was almost dead flat and the soil is the heaviest red clay imaginable. There was a small cluster of trees on the southwest corner, near the maintenance building.

I worked with Mark to develop a layout that emphasized safety, variety, shot value, and landscape interest.



Nemadji Golf Club's third green area on the practice course before construction.

We came up with a 3-hole, par 3, practice course arranged in a counter-clockwise loop around a pond to be excavated. Each hole has three teeing areas and the hole distances vary from 60 to 175 yards. The greens average 4500 ft. sq. and the teeing areas on each hole average 4000 ft. sq.

The individual holes vary in shot value, strategy, and aesthetic appearance. The water hazard, while visible, is not in play. All holes have at least one pin placement to challenge the scratch golfer.

The Budget

As indicated, the total capital budget at Nemadji for the year was \$50,000. Mark hoped to keep construction costs under \$35,000 for the entire project. I took our plan and looked for ways to contain costs.

The priorities established for construction spending were a function of existing topography, soil conditions, and climate. I wanted to concentrate our spending on activities that would provide for drainage and long-term

maintenance considerations.

We were able to come up with adequate specifications for greens construction, a good earthmoving budget to help with surface drainage, and a very good irrigation budget (10 irrigation heads per hole), and still stay under the budget.

The reasons we were able to do a lot with so little money, was the earthmoving hauls were short and only cost \$1 per cubic yard, and the grounds staff at Nemadji, led by superintendent Steve Flagstad and assistant superintendent Mark Prochaska, is experienced with construction projects and took a great deal of pride in helping with the irrigation installation and finish work.

Construction

The earthmoving was contracted to a local excavation company. I specified that the earthwork be bid on a per cubic yard basis, rather than an hourly rate. I did this to allow for flexibility in adding or subtracting earthwork as the work progressed.

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The third green shortly after construction (one week).

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There were not any maps available to plan the project on, therefore earthwork calculations were done by hand and in the field.

Unfortunately, the contractor who was awarded the work negotiated an hourly agreement with Nemadji against my specs. This had a significant impact on the amount of earth we were able to move.

They started construction during a light rain and soon found out how difficult it is to move heavy red clay when it is wet. The trucks were only able to move half loads at a time without getting stuck. By the time the earthmoving budget was expended, the contractor moved half of the specified volume of earth. This was a disappointment in that surface drainage and shaping was limited, something that could have been avoided by following bid specifications.

Shaping was done by both municipal operators and myself. Considering the limited amount of fill to work with, we were able to give the landscape some interesting shape and build solid golf course features.

The greens specs were a shallow, perched water table. They were very similar to USGA specs minus 4" of greens mix, 2" of gravel, and the plastic liner. Working with Steve, we decided this was a good compromise to the preferable USGA specs considering our budget. Green surrounds were covered with 1-2" of imported, finish topsoil.

The tee specs were native, red clay subgrade with 2" of imported, finish topsoil. The surface drainage was designed as "dome" drainage at 0.5% grade in all directions.

The bunkers were built to standard specs and lined with a fabric to protect the white sand from color contamination by the red clay.

The irrigation system was installed by Mark Prochaska, with triangular spacing surrounding the total green complex and fairway areas, and single row spacing on tees.

Marketing of the Course

The 3-hole layout will be used as a practice course for juniors and beginners to learn the game. These players will be encouraged to use this facility and attain a certain level of proficiency before using the championship courses.

Accomplished and experienced players will be able to use the course as a warm-up or practice course. The layout allows a player to hit a wide variety of shots in one tour of the three holes.

Economic Impact

The course is seeded and scheduled to open in June of 1998. Nemadji's internal projections show the addition to be profitable in and of itself and the profits from it will pay off the development costs in two seasons.

As important though, they expect play on the championship courses to be significantly quicker than it is now,

and they will be able to increase revenues by getting more rounds through per day and keeping customers happier.

Golfer Reaction

There was initial opposition to the project from some of the best golfers. They were in favor of spending the money on projects to make the existing courses tougher. They wanted more fairway bunkers, to rebuild a green or two, and to lengthen a few holes.

As is often the case at golf clubs, these voices are the loudest and speak for the smallest contingency of golfers, single digit handicappers.

Now, there is near consensus the project was the best use of capital funds. The added holes and revenue will give everybody a bit more breathing room, and be able to fund future improvements to appease other interests.

Looking Back

The project was very successful in that we were able to make a nice addition to the facility within the budget parameters. There are a couple of things I would do differently if I had it to do over again.

First, the earthmoving bid process damaged the project significantly. A stronger stand with the contractor needed to be made. This would have given us the opportunity to build in more surface drainage in some areas I think is necessary and to build more expansive green complexes.

Second, I would have built twice the teeing area. The positive, enthusiastic reaction from many golfers, particularly those with children, has made it obvious that we underestimated the number of golfers who plan to use the facility. I think more tee space will be necessary to accommodate all the traffic.

From my experience with this project, and from other practice courses I have seen, I think this is a concept that will not go away anytime soon. Many new golf courses plan these facilities to open right along with the regulation golf course and some older courses are adding them in "dead" areas of their existing courses.

They are a good way to loosen up play on the regulation course, for parents to spend time teaching golf to their children, and for experienced players to warm-up before a match. ♣