

Construction Experiences At River Oaks

By Tom Parent

When people ask me about the construction of River Oaks I tell them it was a wonderful experience. . . but I never want to do it again, at least not anytime soon. I missed not having any grass to nurture. I felt like a fish out of water, although I was doing productive and important work. I've always been a hands-on superintendent and spending a summer watching people work was frustrating. Although I've dealt with contractors before, it was never on this scale.

Unfortunately, I was not involved in the design and planning stage, and the tree and earth movers arrived two weeks before I did on June 11, 1990. In addition to the normal stress of moving and starting a new job, construction was well underway. My world consisted of a Gelco trailer, several yellow note pads, a couple of pencils, a rough graded first and second holes, and an army of salespersons who all wanted to get the first crack at me.

Fortunately for me, the city had what many people have told me is Don Herfort's best design, and awarded the construction bid to Park Construction Company. I have nothing but praise for this organization. I soon learned that they knew a lot more about their job than I did, and they did their jobs in such an unrepachable manner that the best thing I could do was leave them alone. That's not to say there was no input. Each day countless decisions needed to be made and work to be inspected and approved or altered. I was also blessed with a city management

who hired me to be their expert and let me do my job.

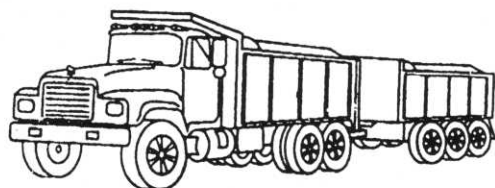
I had many other things in my favor as well. First of all, was the property. River Oaks is situated on the bluffs of the Mississippi River halfway between the cities of Cottage Grove and Hastings which have some spectacular river views. Secondly is the soil. The top two feet is a loamy sand which overlays up to ninety feet of USGA greens specification sand. All the sand for greens, tees and bunkers was quarried on site. We constructed modified USGA sand greens with an 8-2-1 (sand, peat, native soil) mixture directly on top of the native sand with drainage into dry wells. The greens matured very rapidly and have superb root depth, mass and playability. June and July of 1990 had record or near record rainfall, yet we lost only nine days due to wet conditions. Several rainfalls caused washouts that you could hide a semi in. I kept thinking how depressed I would be if it were my crew doing the work, but it was not my problem, it was the contractor's problem. . . thank God!

If any of you heard my talk last fall at the Minnesota Conference, you heard some of the down side of construction. Coordinating multiple contractors — who all have their own self interest in mind and usually want to perform mutually exclusive projects in the same place at the same time — will definitely cause you to sprout a few new gray hairs. I already had more than I cared to admit. Now the expression salt and pepper hair started to be mentioned about me. My beard even started going gray. At the end of construction, we had up to seven contractors on site, each working on the heels of each other. When people interested in building a golf course consult me, I always tell them to have one general contractor in charge. That way all scheduling problems are the contractor's problem, not yours. This will cost a little more, but I believe the project will run more smoothly.

In addition to the demands of the construction of the golf course proper, all the things you take for granted in regard to infrastructure need to be designed, built or purchased. We needed a maintenance building, club house, roads, parking lots, turn lanes, gas, phone and electrical hook-up, equipment, mowers, tools, etc. . . Somehow you need to write a budget with no historical data, with nothing but guesses to guide you. I told my supervisor it was my S.W.A.G. (scientific wild-ass guess) budget. You need to purchase equipment. Salespersons are more than happy to guide you in your efforts. Fortunately, for me, I have nothing but respect for the people I have had the pleasure to work with. For some reason, they don't come to lunch anymore. I think I must of gained five pounds. Working for a municipality requires that everything must have specs and bids. It seemed like an endless task, but the thought of a new maintenance building full of brand new equipment spurred me on. It was an experience few of us ever dare dream of.

Toward the end of July and into August, the contractors were working 14-hour days to bring the project to the point where they could start seeding. The work was progressing at such a rapid rate it was next to impossible to keep up with them. Usually my day started with Stan Folie from Northern Irrigation staking irrigation head locations. Looking for agates is about the only thing that slows Stan down. Toward the end of August, Stan's men were installing a hole or more a day. The seeders arrived

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on September 5th and finished on September 24th. This is the one part of the product that I wish I had the manpower to do myself. Profit orientation has no place on a golf course when it comes to seeding.

Finally, I had grass to take care of. It was an odd sensation being out on the course alone. For months, the golf course had been a beehive of activity. Then one day it was just myself and an irrigation system I had not quite figured out yet. Naturally, one of the wettest summers on record turned into one of the driest falls on record. Except for the rough, this was almost a blessing. With 120 acres of bare soil, a lot of rain is not what you pray for. Washouts were — and are still — a problem. We would just get grass established, and a heavy rain would take them out again. We finally resorted to sodding problem areas. Washouts are probably the most frustrating aspect of the growing phase. Although the construction phase had an adequate budget there was no money left to hire an assistant. I needed help! I cut the greens that were seeded in early September on the first of October. It was great to mow grass again. All the seeded areas did well with the exception of several tees and greens which were seeded too late to germinate, much less thrive.

As last winter came, I spent my time (when I wasn't glued to the radio for news of the war) finishing off the office space in the maintenance shop. The clubhouse was under construction and that was a welcome diversion to my own company. If you have never equipped a maintenance shop from scratch, it's a mind-numbing experience, but again the thought of all those

new tools and equipment somehow spurred me on. Winter also brought the most painful job of deciding who of the 47 people applying for the assistant positions would get an interview. I dislike firing people, but that's what I felt I was doing each time a resume went into the "no" pile. It was interesting how the selection process brought home the importance of a professional looking resume. Get thee to a professional typesetter and printer!

Spring brought Ben Ratzlaff and Kelly Johnson to River Oaks. We put a pound NPK per/m of ag grade 19-19-19 down the first of May. Then it rained and it rained and it rained and then it rained some more. The grass grew faster than we could ever hope to mow it, but the course looked better every day. We followed the rule of thumb: Fertilize! Fertilize! fertilize! I thought we had applied too much. Then I would notice an area where we had overlapped coverage and noticed how much better it looked and we would go out and fertilize again. We put a lot of fertilizer down (10+ pounds/M on greens) but if I had it to do all over again, I would put more down. We opened the front nine on June 13, a year, two weeks and two days from the start of construction.

The entire course opened June 29, 1991. From opening to the Halloween storm we had 26,000 rounds and generated revenues substantially over budget. Needless to say, this, in addition to bringing the project in on budget, the city was pleased.

I learned a great deal from this experience. When our deep well went down twice in the two hottest weeks in June. I wished I had a larger holding pond and several smaller capacity well pumps instead of one large unit. Most of our timing problems resulted from the well drilling and pump station installation. If

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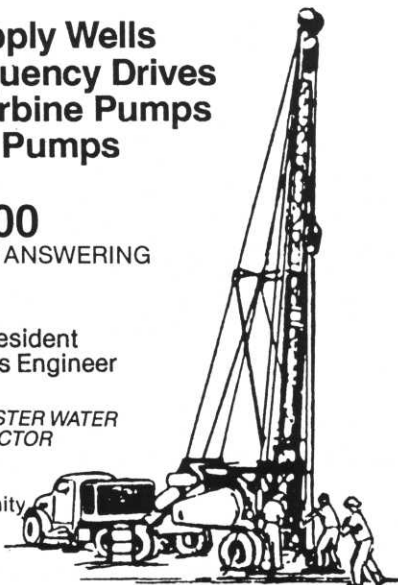
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How many of you have had an early morning call, or one waiting on your desk, from a caller who identifies himself as representing the "XYZ" Chemical Co. from Dallas, Texas, or New York, or wherever?

He likes to address you by your first name or by your surname and the conversation starts like this: "_____, we received your card asking about our product. Now before we go any further, would you like to receive our clock radio or the five inch TV set? And have we got a deal for you!! We have a great deal on 50-gallon drums of our special weed killing chemical (or roofing compound). Now would you like three or four drums today? We have a special shipment coming your way this week and could give you an additional break."

"Oh, you don't need a drum, what about a 30?"

"You could only use a five? We don't put them up that small."

If you should fall for this "sucker bait" and buy, you will soon find that you got taken. The weed spray is so watered down that it take several times as much to accomplish the same results as the spray you had bought from your local dealer. The special roofing compound washes off in the first rain.

There is much to be said in dealing with your local chemical fertilizer, seed or turf equipment dealer.

(1) he is close at hand. (2) He is almost assuredly selling a product that can be relied upon. (3) He is as close as his phone or at most only a few miles away. He is in business to stay. He wants to serve his customers and have them satisfied—and coming back. Have you a complaint? He is there to listen and answer.

And certainly not the least—he is probably a member of your local association. He supports your activities with his dues, with his help at seminars, participates in your turf equipment shows. Not the least, he is a taxpayer in your district, he participates in community activities.

So, next time you need to purchase some fertilizer, or weed spray, or grass seed, some irrigation or turf equipment—give your local dealer a break. We need him—he needs us.

—Credit: OGCSA Newsletter

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possible I would recommend that both are installed before the earth movers arrive. I learned you can get what you want if you're willing to fight for it. Remember, the contractors and the architect work for you . . . not the other way around. I pushed hard to eliminate any areas that would require hand-mowing. I did not want to buy a fleet of flymos. This can usually be done with very minor changes. Fortunately, Don Herfort is not from the school of what I call "reckless architects." Except for some excessive green sculpting, the course has an excellent design and is very playable and manageable. Don is a master of bunker design. Only once last year did we have problems with washouts. During construction we sodded around the greens and bunkers to prevent erosion. I highly recommend this and would strongly recommend sodding around the tee surface areas.

As I said at the beginning, I don't want to do it again any time soon. But I wouldn't have missed it for the world. It was very rewarding to watch a rough piece of ground develop into what so far is — and in several years hopefully mature into — a splendid public golf course.

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