



Stadium Golf Arrives

The PGA TOUR is playing to bigger houses with its new "Stadium Golf" idea with a batch of new courses either under construction or on the drawing boards.

by Ron Hall, assistant editor

Bringing the mountain to Mohammed is akin to bringing the stadium to professional golf. Impractical, yes, but hardly impossible.

The art of converting souls, even on a golf course, starts with moving mountains.

Stadium golf. Chalk up a pretty nifty marketing coup.

Dean R. Beman's dream to parlay the touring pros into even more of a spectator event (meaning more converts, more exposure, more bucks) is taking off. Beman, of course, is the commissioner of the Professional

Spectators at the 18th green are treated to this view of the colonial clubhouse as well as the action below from their "stadium" seats.

Golfers Association (PGA) TOUR. His idea is as old as professional sports—maybe older considering the big deal made over the gladiators in the original Coliseum. Showcase your product where it can be seen. It took tradition-laden golf a few years to catch on, but now it's making up for lost time. Credit Beman for kicking it off with the introduction of Tournament Players Clubs with stadium-type seating facilities.

"Stadium seating is something the commissioner has had in the back of his mind for as long time," Dale Antram at PGA national headquarters in Ponte Vedra, FL, tells *Weeds Trees & Turf*. "It's more than making it. It's getting tremendous reaction."

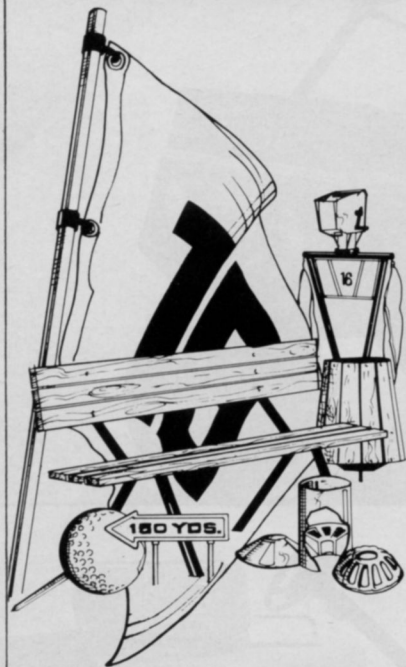
That sound you hear in the back-

ground is the sweet rumble of bulldozers pushing Beman's dream into realities all over this country.

Good idea spreads

"New" PGA TOUR tournament facilities are in operation at five locations already. Starting with the Tournament Players Club (TPC) at Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra, sister TPC operations sprang up in rapid succession near Coral Springs, FL, Hartford, Ct, Castle Rock, CO, Washington D.C., and Houston. Not all of the courses are new, some have been renovated. All, however, will have several features in common, the most obvious being an annual major tournament and provisions to allow thousands of additional spectators to see the touring pros in

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action, in person, stadium type seating.

That's not to say you're going to see row upon row of bleachers at your local course in the years to come. The polyester crowd wouldn't allow it, the demand wouldn't be there without a major tournament, and some courses are too sacred to be tinkered with.

"There is no intent by the PGA TOUR to do away with some of the great courses," Antram adds. Tournament Players Clubs "will work only in the places where the sponsor, the

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—Antram

developer, and the Tour can all come out winners."

Winners all the way around?

The TPC at Plum Creek, just south of Denver was completed days before hosting the Senior Tour's Denver Post Champions of Golf this past summer and thousands of spectators filled the grass-covered bleachers built into the stone walls of the rolling hills. The Sammy Davis Jr. Greater Hartford Open, held at the TPC of Hartford for the first time, likewise drew phenomenal galleries. Unlike the Plum Creek, Sawgrass, and Eagle Trace courses, the Hartford location does not have bleachers built into the earth but was designed with spectator mounds. Noted golf architect Pete Dye, inspiration for Sawgrass (home of the Tournament Champions Tournament) and Plum Creek, redesigned the back nine at Hartford, and his 18th hole, literally in a horseshoe canyon, played to an almost unbelievable gallery.

Spectators like the view

"It's given the spectators who are paying the bills the chance to see the action," Pete Pierson, superintendent at the Hartford course, says. "There is a tremendous amount of spectator viewing. I think it was talked about for some time after the tournament."

Course superintendents like Pierson and Cal Roth, superintendent at the TPC at Plum Creek, face additional maintenance tasks as a result of the stadium concept, the biggest being keeping the acres of spectator viewing areas sharp.

Roth admits the scenic rock-faced

bleachers at his Colorado course are going to take some extra work, specifically hand-mowing with Flymo mowers. He's using the opportunity for some experimentation as well.

Roth says, "the concepts are new and I'm positive that they're going to work, but it's going to take a couple of years to find out what grasses are going to work."

Roth is relying on fine fescues for the roughs although the spectator area around the 18th hole is Kentucky bluegrass to blend into the lawn of the nearby club house. "I'm learning an awful lot about fescue. I haven't found too many experts when it comes to fescue and I have to kind of teach myself," he says. Although the bluegrass in the spectator area around the 18th should wear better with the huge tournament gallery, Roth feels the fescue elsewhere will require approximately half as much maintenance and still look good.

Eliminating handwork

The spectator mounds at Hartford are likewise covered with fine fescue, but the slopes are gradual enough to allow Pierson's crew to mow easily. "We can get into quite a few of them with a seven gang or a five gang or a rotary," Pierson points out. "We have eliminated a lot of the hand work." The Hartford crew combats the tremendous pounding of the roughs by the larger galleries by allowing the fescues to grow to 3 1/2 to 4 inches. "When it gets dry we just quit cutting," Pierson adds.

But having a bigger audience for their handiwork is worth the challenge, both Pierson and Roth agree.

New courses coming

So, what's in store? More Tournament Players Clubs for sure.

New courses near Fort Pierce and Sarasota, FL, should be opening early this year, while plans are being finalized for courses near Dallas, San Antonio, and Phoenix sometime in the not-so-distant future. Nobody is ready to pull in the reins on the stadium-type concept yet.

"Golf is at somewhat of a disadvantage to other spectator sports," Antram of the PGA TOUR says. "It doesn't have a home field advantage. Also, the action is spread over 200 acres. What this idea has done is to create a tremendous increase in interest and in the size of the gallery."

In other words, asking Jack Nicklaus to play in the Rose Bowl is tantamount to asking Attila the Hun to confine his pillaging to Newark. It's obviously a heck of a lot easier to bring the stadium to him.

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