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BY DESIGN



Excellence in Golf Design from the American Society of Golf Course Architects

A wide-angle photograph of a golf course. The foreground is dominated by a large, well-manicured green fairway. Several sand traps (bunkers) are scattered across the landscape, some with grassy edges. In the background, there is a dense line of tall, thin trees under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The lighting suggests a sunny day, with shadows cast across the grass.

Changing the scene

How ASGCA architects are helping to reposition golf

Also: ASGCA membership by the numbers • Lessons from the ski business • China • Bunkers

Repositioning | Adam Lawrence

Changing the SCENE

Across the world, golf course markets are changing. Adam Lawrence looks at how golf architects can help owners find the right solution to match their new requirements



Everyone in the golf design, development and operation business knows that a golf course is a living entity that changes over time, and needs work every now and again to keep it looking fresh and performing well.

But what not so many realize is that the same is true for a golf business. A business model that was highly successful twenty years ago may not be ideal today, and a proposition that seems crazy at the moment could well be the perfect solution in the future.

When an owner or operator realizes that a change of business model is needed, the likelihood is that the golf course will need to be changed to match. Characteristics that suit a

private club with a small membership may well not work well if the course is to become a daily fee operation, looking to maximize rounds. Even changes to the facility that, at first glance, shouldn't affect the golf course may well have an impact. If you need to expand your clubhouse because you are moving from private to public, is there room in the original land plan, or will golf holes have to be changed to accommodate the bigger building?

Golf courses around the world are facing this kind of question all the time. Course changes are needed for many different reasons, and the ideal solution for each will be wholly dependent on circumstances. In markets where land values are strong,

for example—such as Ireland a few years ago and Australia today—a number of old-established golf clubs, located in relatively urban areas and thus sitting on extremely valuable real estate, have concluded that selling their existing course to a developer moving to a new, out of town site and building an entirely new course is a good way to secure their future. Some of the deals that have been done are mindboggling, with clubs finding their property's value to developers is enough to buy a new site, construct a golf course and associated facilities and still have a large sum of money in the bank for a rainy day.

In difficult economic conditions, of course, this kind of solution is likely



Newport National in Rhode Island was originally planned as a private club, but is now the top public access facility in the state

to be rare, and courses are more often looking to find ways to increase revenue or cut costs. Some, sadly, are being repositioned right out of business, and being turned into public open spaces, housing developments or office and retail parks. But in many cases, owners and operators are working with golf architects to change their course to make it more suited to a different business model, often with remarkable success.

One solution that has been popular in many different locations is to redesign the golf course in order to carve out a parcel of land that can be used for residential or commercial development. There are many examples of such projects that have been completed, and

lots more currently being considered. “We’re currently working on a project to change a par 35 nine hole course to par 31, to accommodate a substantial brownstone and townhouse development,” says Arizona-based architect Forrest Richardson, ASGCA. At the Deltona Club, near Orlando, a successful project a few years ago saw Bobby Weed, ASGCA entirely redesign the golf course. Weed’s dramatic redesign made use of the site’s natural sand to create large, dramatic wastetype bunkers, significantly increasing the course’s visual appeal; the project was named Florida’s best restoration for the year. On top of this, the redesign created a 17 acre parcel of land within the site for development; this

land was used for 300 age-restricted condominiums, transforming the economic position of the club.

Another solution—especially relevant today given the demand for alternative golf facilities that has been chronicled in previous issues of *By Design*—has been converting courses into practice facilities, executive courses or similar. At the North Olmsted Golf Club in Ohio, originally opened in 1946, a redesign led by ASGCA Past President Bill Amick saw the course shortened from a conventional length nine holes to an executive course of 1,702 yards, playing to a par of 30. Amick’s project enabled the developer to free up land for constructing and selling



Bobby Weed, ASGCA, reinvented Orlando's Deltona Club

housing, which has been successfully completed, and the course has been passed over to the ownership of the Northern Ohio Golf Association.

Often, course repositioning happens because of a change of ownership. A classic example of this is at Isleworth in Florida, where after Tavistock Group bought the property, architect Steve Smyers, ASGCA was brought in to redesign the course, which had originally been designed by ASGCA Past President Ed Seay and Arnold Palmer, ASGCA.

Architect Jeffrey Blume, ASGCA, is becoming something of an expert at this kind of project. At the Quail Valley Country Club, in Missouri City, outside Houston, which hosted Shell Houston Open in 1973 and 1974, Blume led a renovation project that has played a major role in the rebirth of a dying course. "Quail Valley was set to become a housing development until the city stepped in to acquire the property through eminent domain and convert it from a private country club into a municipal golf course," Blume says. The city paid \$7.4 million for the club, funded Blume's \$5 million renovation, and is now investing another \$7.5

million to build a new clubhouse and community center.

Blume reshaped the greens and bunkers of the 1970 course, with the aim of creating affordable municipal golf that could compete with the local daily fee courses. By increasing the gradient of some areas on the course, Blume's project improved the previously ineffective drainage, creating four new lakes around the property to contain runoff. The course is now ranked top affordable public course in the Houston metropolitan area.

The upshot has been that the neighborhood around Quail Valley, previously in decline, has been revitalized, to the extent that the project received the Houston Business Journal's 2010 Community Impact Award. "We have resurrected a community rather than just renovating a golf course," says Blume.

The upscale private golf club model is appealing to commercial developers, as, if the project is a success, the initiation fees paid by members will enable investors to get a fairly rapid return on their money. But it is risky for all that; when times are tight, persuading potential

members to part with large sums of money to buy their way into a golf club can be difficult.

That's why, across the US, there has been a trend for private clubs to be converted into semi-private or even daily fee operations in the last few years. Sometimes, this process requires course changes as well; what's ideal for a low-key private club is unlikely to be suitable for a busy pay and play operation.

Newport National Golf Club in Rhode Island is an example of how successful this kind of change can be. Opened in 1991, and designed by ASGCA Fellow Arthur Hills and his then associate, Drew Rogers, ASGCA, Newport National was envisioned as a private facility through planning and development, and remained that way through the early years of operation. But membership sales were slow on the take, and ultimately a decision was made to open the course to the public. Now, Newport National is the top public access course in the state.

"Very little has been done to the course through the years—it is being conditioned at the level that was



initially envisioned,” says Rogers, who continues to consult at the course today. “The course is much the same, primarily because of the simplicity of the original design. It was built with on a modest budget, with little earth movement, and the simple contouring promotes firm and fast conditions, which was necessitated because there was not much water available for irrigation. So we have a simple irrigation system, double row, and selected turfgrasses that fit the conditions.”

And, occasionally, things go the other way. At Houston National in Texas, which had been struggling for some time, local businessman Robert Steele bought the property last August. Formerly a 27-hole facility, Steele hired Jeff Blume to add another nine holes, making the club’s south course into an eighteen hole layout. Which they then launched as a private club! Opened in September, the new, private Sterling Country Club at Houston National already has 250 members, and is going from strength to strength. ●

For more information on repositioning or to find an ASGCA member near you, visit: www.asgca.org/members

CASE STUDY: THE TRANSFORMATION OF SAIL HO IN SAN DIEGO

In San Diego, the Sail Ho course, created by the U.S. Navy in the 1920s, has been transformed as part of a large-scale redevelopment project run by the city. The course was part of the now-closed Naval Training Center. After the closure, the Spanish style historic buildings along the waterfront and the Sail Ho course were turned over the city for redevelopment into a new 460 acre mixed-use community, now known as Liberty Station. “The renovation of

this great little nine hole short course, and opening it to the public, has created a wonderful golf facility for the community,” says local architect Cary Bickler, ASGCA, who led the renovation of a course he has played since his childhood. “It’s very popular, in part because it’s affordable and fun. Everyone can play from grandchildren with their grandparents, to advanced skill level golfers who drop by to play a quick round to tune up their short game.”



Cary Bickler, ASGCA led the renovation of the nine-hole Sail Ho course he has played since childhood, originally part of a now-closed Naval facility