

The Case for 9-Hole Golf Courses

Story published at 11:51, Friday, February 28th, 2014

Page last updated at 12:03 pm, Friday, February 28th, 2014

It makes good economic and environmental sense to develop 9-hole courses and specialist golf operators say that they can work profitably, by Jonathan Gaunt, Golf Course Architect



Jonathan Gaunt

In the early 2000s the UK golf industry was still looking good, but the boom of the 1990's was beginning to slow down. The R&A's report in the late 1990s – The Future of Golf – in which they stated 200 new courses would be required in the UK by 2000 in order to satisfy demand – had fuelled the boom and created, as a result, numerous “farmer's” courses, with dull golf holes being routed across muddy fields on windswept sites, far from population.

The 2000's saw the development of new courses in locations where golf had already been introduced, but had not been 'exploited' – in eastern Europe, the Mediterranean basin and north Africa, the Middle East and Asia, for example. These new courses were often built to a higher specification than the majority of UK golf courses, being part of tourist resorts and destinations, based on the fact that many UK courses were already 100 years old or more.

Throughout the 2000's the golf boom continued strongly and expanded to China and India until 2008 when the recession hit. In fact, a moratorium had been enforced by the Chinese government on all new golf development in 2004, but it was not until April 2011, when there was a crackdown to reinforce the law until it really

started to have a big impact. Development has slowed but not yet stopped.

For many golf course architects this meant that projects that had been planned and designed (including me) were suddenly placed "on a shelf" and either left to wither and rot or preserved to be (hopefully) rekindled at a later date, when funds would become available. No-one would have envisaged that the funding would continue to be so scarce and in the meantime, the golf course development industry slumped to (virtually) a standstill.



Royal Worlington 3rd hole

There are some developments though, that have remained reasonably recession free and these have remained "below the radar" in journalistic terms. It may be something to do with the nature of these developments why they are not reported on.

Need for investment

Many UK courses – private/proprietary/municipal – are in need of investment. With the state of the 'seasonal' weather we have now become used to – wet summers and long cold winters – golf courses are less attractive places to play. There are so many other outdoor sporting options for active people today and in relation to this, the golf industry needs to buck up its ideas to make changes for the better.

Troon Golf – one of the largest golf operators in the world – has recently stated that they would like more 9-hole courses developed to make the game more attractive and less time-consuming. In

2012 HSBC produced a report, entitled, Golf's 2020 Vision – in which it states the need for golf to be made more attractive for non-golfers, for families, for women and schoolchildren. It also says that 9-hole facilities are the future of golf – quicker rounds and more family-focussed.



Kaskada – academy course

Everyone in the industry – including many other golf operators, the R&A, USGA, PGA, European Tour and big 'pro' names such as Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player – has been talking (moaning) about the scourge of slow play for years. However, as long as the pros continue to play 6-hour televised rounds of golf and the governing authorities continue to do nothing to deal with it, then, the average golfer will follow suit in the Saturday morning medal, lining up his fourth putt for an eight on par 3. I've written articles about it, too – I'm still waiting for someone to take notice of my suggestion to make the golf hole bigger (6"/150mm) – this would transform the game overnight.

These are all great ideas, but where does a private members club in the wilds, of, say, the Derbyshire Peak District go to find investment, and new members and green fees? The banks don't lend money any more, especially if the business has the word 'golf' associated with it.

Revolution is required

What the industry needs is a revolution. This could be the start....build fewer 18-hole courses and more 9-hole courses with state of the art practice facilities and full-length driving ranges. Make golf safer by eradicating narrow fairways, insufficient safety margins, crossing holes, parallel holes, etc.

In the UK there are hundreds of 18-hole courses built on sites that are only 40 hectares (100 acres) or less, with poor quality practice facilities. Many of these courses are short by modern standards at say 5500 to 6500 yards from the back tees, with narrow or insubstantial safety margins that would make an insurance consultant or health and safety officer cringe.

Given recent claims for damages and compensation this puts many UK clubs at great risk. In 2011, a claim was made by a golfer who lost an eye after he was hit by a wayward ball – he was blinded in one eye and now has a prosthetic eye. Mr Phee, who was walking between holes when he was hit by a shot struck by James Gordon from the 18th tee, sued both the player who struck the shot and the course owner of Niddry Castle Golf Club at Winchburgh, West Lothian. Damages were agreed at £397,000, and, at the Court of Session in Edinburgh, Lord Brailsford said Mr Gordon, from Livingston, was 70% liable, while the club was 30% liable. Lord Brailsford said a golfer of Mr Gordon's experience should have been aware of the risk his tee shot posed to Mr Phee, adding that Niddry Castle GC failed in its duty to provide proper safety signs. Lawyers acting for both Mr Gordon and the club had claimed "contributory negligence", saying Mr Phee looked up on hearing a warning shout of "fore". In effect, shouting fore is no longer a suitable defence.

Putting up some safety signs, though, is not the answer to this – the answer is to increase safety margins on UK golf courses – both internal and external. Putting up fencing/netting is not a suitable solution either in many cases, because planning permission may not necessarily be granted for such a structure in the green belt.

Tree plantations can help, but the trees have to grow to a substantial size/height to provide a suitable safety barrier that blocks shots hit to a height of 30 metres or higher.

The solution

The real answer is to reduce existing 18-hole courses in urban/suburban areas down to 9-holes and provide a high quality practice area/driving range and short game practice zones. Golfers will argue that a 9-hole course is not a full golf course, however, if well designed with imaginative features and hazards, with two distinct tee-boxes per hole, there is the possibility of creating an 18-hole course within a 9-hole course. It may be possible to create two greens per hole, or, at least, much larger greens with many more pin positions.

Assuming that an 18-hole course is 6000 yards in length, this equates to about 22 hectares of intensively maintained playing area. If the site is a total of 40 hectares, then 45% of the site is trees, rough grassland, peripheral woodland/scrub, clubhouse, car-parking and practice area.

If the course was reduced to a 9-hole course the intensively maintained area would not reduce by half, but by a proportion, to, say 15 hectares, plus 3 hectares for a driving range/practice area. This entire area, plus that which is no longer the 18-hole course could then be remodelled/re-profiled using imported soils (land-filled). This 'working' area would equate to about 250,000 square metres (25 hectares), which, if then raised, on average, by 2 metres in elevation, to create naturally draining playing areas – tees, fairways and greens – would involve the importation of 500,000 cubic metres of inert soil (55,000 lorry loads). In certain parts of northern UK, this may not amount to an enormous income because the rate per lorry load is lower, say £50. However, in the South-East of the UK, especially in the 'Home' Counties, the rate can increase to £100 and even more.

Put simply, a project that involves, say 250,000 m³ of inert soil importation in the South-East UK will potentially, earn revenue of about £2.75 million (27,500 lorries). This is not to be sniffed at. However, it must be looked at realistically and sensibly.

If an 18-hole course was to decide to 'demolish' its existing course in order to build a new 9-holes and some "state-of-the-art" practice facilities, the development costs could be as follows:

Planning application and permit application to Environment Agency	£150,000
Design and project management	£200,000
Construction of 9-holes with multiple tees/larger greens	£1,750,000
Construction of practice facilities	<u>£250,000</u>
Total development cost	£2,350,000
Income from soils importation	£2,750,000
Profit	£400,000

If the project was outside of the South-East of UK, then the above calculations would be very different, especially if the rates were £50 per lorry load, as opposed to £100. However, it may be possible to increase the importation volume to counter this. However, it must not be ignored that it takes some time to import soil on to a site – especially if restrictions are placed on traffic movements by the local authority.

If the soil importation process takes three or four years, though, the project can be disruptive for golf club members and visitors, however, the course re-development work can be carefully phased to allow a minimum of 9, 12 or 18-holes to be kept in play throughout the working period.

Soil importation

Over the past 20 years or so, the term “landfill” has been negatively attached to golf developments that involved converting golf courses into ‘lunar landscapes’ or ‘battlefields’ by unscrupulous contractors with no eye for design, with the focus on making as much money as possible. Thankfully, a number of these contractors have gone bust, but the resulting effect on the golf industry has been damaging.

In recent years – certainly since the recession hit, these projects have become more carefully planned and qualified golf course architects have been involved in their development. Some members of the EIGCA (including me) have been working mainly on these kinds of projects for more than 10 years now, including two ex-presidents. This doesn’t necessary give all of these projects the

“seal of approval”, but it has helped the projects they are working on to be better designed and sympathetically planned, with the focus being on sustainability rather than financial profit.

We’ve been working on more than a dozen of these “landfill” projects. However we prefer to call them “Environment Agency approved inert soil recovery” projects. We prefer this term because we are providing a sustainable soil remediation service for building and development projects in the locality.

The soils that are excavated from building sites comprise topsoil, subsoil, rock, gravel, sand, clay and sometimes peat. All these inert materials need to be removed from site, but the contractor has to pay a significant sum to County and local authority tip/landfill sites for the privilege. If the contractor deposits these inert materials on a golf course site (or, on farmland) (subject to being in possession of the correct permits by Environment Agency), the cost is lower (to be paid to the golf club) than it would be to a County/local authority. For a golf club in financial straits, though, it is still a reasonable sum.

This reasonable sum, when added up on a rate per lorry load, can soon equate to a significant amount of income. This revenue can then be used to develop the golf facilities further.

On our numerous projects scattered around the UK, from as far south as the Isle of Wight, to London and the South-East, to the north of England and even in Scotland, we are improving golf facilities at no cost to the owner.

The case for 9-hole courses

Some golfers criticise 9-hole courses and regard them as a limited challenge, however, I’ve played some very challenging 9-hole courses and really enjoyed them. For the golfer there are advantages to outweigh the disadvantages, for example, if you play only 9-holes it takes less time to play (speeding up play is a big issue for the international governing golf authorities), it’s less tiring for children and older people and less expensive for a green fee. For the environment, less land is required, therefore, less intensively

maintained grass, less fertiliser, less water for irrigation—sustainably, it makes good economic and environmental sense to develop 9-hole courses. Even specialist golf operators I have spoken to say that they can make 9-hole courses work profitably.



- 9-holes full length course with generous teeing complexes and greens;
- a high quality 300 metre length practice area/driving range;
- 3 or 6-hole pitch and putt course;
- practice chipping green;
- Adventure Golf course;
- Car-parking for 200 cars;
- Clubhouse for golfers and functions;
- Small pro-shop

All facilities would be open-access, family friendly at affordable prices. This is not a simple project to develop without careful thought and planning. If the local authority was well informed they will see that there is a benefit to them in terms of offering an exciting sports facility within their borough/district, which is responding to potential demand relating to golf being a sport being

played at the 2016 Brazil Olympics. The key to this project being successful is the way in which it would need to be funded— by achieving consent for inert soil importation and/or residential properties away from main golf playing areas. The planning application would, therefore, need to be handled by an experienced professional.

Conclusion

In the 1990's and 2000's there were literally hundreds of golf courses developed throughout the UK and probably most of them started business with a £1m, £2m or £3 overdraft. It's not surprising that so many of them are now struggling financially or have been sold over and over, devaluing as each sale goes through. This is unsustainable. The amount of debt in the golf industry is enormous and I'm not willing to put a figure on it. However, the importation of inert soils to remodel existing courses, extend from 18 to 27 holes, or from 9 to 18 holes is an interesting prospect.

Another way of looking at it is this: the excesses of the 1990's and 2000's may well return, but I am not sure about this personally. Golf developers and operators are far more cautious in 2013 and in this respect, they are looking to maximise on the facilities they have, to make them as good as they can be and, if necessary, make improvements economically.

This article was first published in Pitchcare Magazine and we thank the editor of Pitchcare for allowing us to reprint it here
GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTURE