

# FAIRWAY TO THE FUTURE

*Course renovation does not always have to be painful.*

by BO LINKS

**Y**OU SAY you want a revolution? Ever been in a feisty mood, ready to rub your hands together and stir up some mischief? Not just a little bit of mischief, mind you, but real trouble, as in *Big T*, which rhymes with *C*, which stands for *controversy*? The recipe is relatively simple, and when properly followed, it can ignite a civil war, pit family against family and, if things really get cooking, probably sever a few long-standing friendships. Here's what you do: Step 1 — Attend your club's annual meeting. Step 2 — Rise to make a motion. Step 3 — Move that the golf course be remodeled.

Don't worry about whether the motion passes. The debate alone will do enough damage to satisfy the sternest shrapnel-tested combat veteran.

Why is this so? Because club members hold their home course as close to their hearts as one of their children. And just as with a wayward child, the average member will leap at the chance to take a little corrective action if given the right opportunity. The problem is that, oftentimes, club members cannot — and do not — agree on what needs to be done. Hence the debate, the controversy, the civil war.

It doesn't have to be that way. A host of good things can flow from a properly conceived and well-executed remodeling job. For openers, how about greens that drain correctly and are playable the day after a heavy rainfall? Or bunkers that have consistent, playable sand? Or approach shots that are properly framed, inviting players of all abilities to test their skill? Or tees that are level and pointed in the right direction? You can have all of this and more. The only trick is securing membership approval and then getting the job done right.

The issues relating to course remodeling are as many as they are complex. We've all heard the horror stories as well as the grumbling that accompanies them.

"They said it would take nine months, but it took two years and

our new greens are as bumpy as an alligator's hide."

"Why did you install that bunker?"

"Why did you remove that bunker?"

"Why did you make such a mess?"

"Why did it cost so much?"

Heard enough? Well, relax. These are the easy questions, folks.

Although we do hear horror stories and we must often confront hard inquiries, we don't hear enough about the jobs that go well. You know, those believe-it-or-not tales of construction jobs that come in on budget and ahead of schedule. Yes, it has happened. And it can happen to you if you approach the issue properly and prepare accordingly.

At Lake Merced Golf and Country Club in Daly City, California, a complete remodeling job was accomplished without a hitch, with far more accomplished than even the most rabid backers of the project could have imagined.

The actual construction at Lake Merced took approximately 90 days. The financial package was such that every member could afford the assessment. And in the end, a good golf course was transformed into a truly extraordinary one. By the time the project was two-thirds finished, even those members who had voted against doing the work had come on board as enthusiastic supporters.

## Doing the Job Right

But all of this begs the most important issue. How do you get this accomplished? To begin with (and to quote those athletic wear ads), get real. Lake Merced was not remodeled on a whim. This wasn't the case of a member or small cadre of players wanting to change the course to suit their own agenda. Quite to the contrary, Lake Merced's remodeling grew out of a serious deterioration of putting green root structure and poor drainage in and around the green complexes. Once the club investigated the problem and

decided to correct it, knowledgeable members soon realized that the economies of scale dictated that they take advantage of a unique opportunity to repair other problems that, while not as serious as the condition of the root structure and drainage, had long cried out for amelioration. In short, the club confronted an agronomic crisis and chose to solve it in comprehensive fashion. And they did it within budget. And on time.

The formula used at Lake Merced is a textbook example of how to do the job right. In reviewing the history of the remodeling at Lake Merced, we can learn several rules that should guide any golf course confronting similar problems or contemplating similar work.

## Analysis Instead of Paralysis

One point to be made at the outset is that many good to great courses — and many average ones, too — have serious agronomic problems. Not because there is anything inherently wrong with the layout or because there has been any failure of performance by the maintenance crew. The plain and simple fact is that golf courses change over time. Every day there is growth and death; trees die, roots impede nearby putting greens, limbs fall, fungus spreads, old soil compacts. Let's face it, nothing is forever, and even golf courses need some corrective surgery now and then. So rule one is, always be aware of the agronomic profile of your golf course. There are several ways to do this, but perhaps the most economical and efficient is to take advantage of the USGA's Turfgrass Advisory Service (commonly known as TAS). Under this program, USGA agronomists visit your course and advise you as to the status and needs of the playing surface. In the case of Lake Merced, it was time and money well spent.

At Lake Merced, we first learned of the problems with our putting green root structure while preparing the



Lake Merced's number three hole is a 185-yard par 3. By rearranging the bunkers during renovation, the bunkers were eliminated on the far side of the green and well short of the green. These bunkers had served only to penalize the high-handicapper playing the course. The temporary greens, built for golfers' play during construction, were quite good and kept the golfers happy during the construction process.

course for the 1990 U.S. Junior Amateur. "When the USGA cored our greens and showed us the turf samples, it verified what I had been saying for some time," comments Superintendent Lou Tonelli. "We had a 'black layer' beneath the surface. None of our members could see it and many of them thought everything was fine because we were able to limp along and produce good putting surfaces through the use of appropriate fertilizers and an awful lot of overtime labor. But our greens had become drug addicts and they couldn't exist for long if they stayed dependent on chemicals for survival."

What caused the problem? "Our course was originally constructed in the early 1920s. It was a tremendous track, but it had to be rebuilt in the mid-'60s," states Tonelli. "The work had to be done because an interstate freeway took away the heart and soul of the original layout. When the greens were rebuilt back then, they used loam over the drains. It was a formula for disaster and it caught up with us after 30 years.

"The loam compacted and trapped water before it ever got to the drains," continues Tonelli. "We had stagnant water beneath the surface and anybody with any brains knows you can't grow grass in stagnant water. Our root structure was only about a half-inch deep. To compound the problem, we had to battle nematodes. With a shallow root structure, it was only a matter of time before disease won the battle and overtook the grass. Our greens were virtually defenseless. We had to do something or risk losing them."

Once the condition of the greens had been diagnosed and the evidence was collected, the next task was to educate club officials as to the seriousness of the problem. That process took about two years. Lake Merced's Greens & Grounds Committee learned what was needed and began passing its knowledge to the full Board of Directors and other members as well.

Within five years of the problem first surfacing, many — but not enough — club members were aware of the existence of the troublesome black layer and the need to correct the conditions that caused it. That's when things got dicey.

A proposal was made to remodel the golf course and cure the problem. Meetings were held and debate raged; no member could get a drink in our clubhouse bar without confronting the hard questions: Did we really need the work? What would it cost? Who

would do it? How long would it take? What would the finished product look like? The controversy created by the remodeling issue gave pause to everyone, particularly to the project's most fervent backers; they soon realized that if the matter were put to a vote, they would lose, and soundly. They wisely backed off and regrouped. Yet in that early setback, the proponents of the remodeling project learned a valuable lesson: Make sure every single club member is informed before laying the issue on the table.

#### Do the Homework and Present a Complete Package to the Membership

The Greens & Grounds Committee and the Board of Directors went back to work and did some more homework. "One thing we realized," comments Dr. Merton Goode, who was one of the board members actively promoting the remodeling project, "is that our full membership simply did not understand that this work was not a frill or a whim. It was something we absolutely had to do in order to save our golf course. We had to make the case, and once we did, the issue easily gained the support of the entire membership. The facts really brought us together."

One technique Dr. Goode and his small committee utilized was to target literally every member in the club and arrange for small sessions where people could be taken out on the course, shown turf samples, and allowed to see the problem in practical terms. Members came to learn that with better drainage, the course would be playable after a heavy rainstorm, as opposed to having to wait a week or more for soggy greens to dry out. Others could see how proper drainage would eventually, and substantially, reduce maintenance expenses.

"We knew the issue was not about us," observed Club President Stan Friedman. "It was about our children and grandchildren. Although we restored a historical look and feel to our golf course, what we really did was build a fairway to the future so



*One goal of the renovation process was to integrate the bunkers.*

generations yet unborn will be able to enjoy our facility."

When it came time to take a second vote, a complete plan was placed before a membership that was ready to receive it. Financing was arranged so that there were a variety of packages available; if members wanted to pay the assessment at once, they could do so, but they could also defer payment under several monthly payment options. If a member withdrew from the club before completing payment of the assessment (or prior to completion of the work in the case of a member who paid in full at the outset), he could get a pro-rata refund for his unused assessment. In short, money was removed from the debate. The only issue left was whether the work should be done.

#### Playing Through

Our superintendent and his crew built a *course within the course* so members, particularly older members, would be able to play an executive course while the reconstruction work was being done. This arrangement worked beautifully, as no one was prevented from enjoying a regular weekly game. Indeed, the *temporary greens* were of such quality that when Superintendent Lou Tonelli aerated them,

several members asked him jokingly why he hadn't cut temporaries for the temporaries. It was the ultimate compliment.

#### Economies of Scale

As the plan took shape, it originally consisted of remodeling all 18 greens and every bunker on the golf course. Although first consideration was given to dividing the work and doing six holes at a time, the club quickly opted to take the plunge and do everything at once. "We wanted uniform putting greens," stressed Dr. Goode. "The only way to ensure that was to do them all at once."

Soon the club realized something else. It was possible to incorporate several additional jobs into the program at marginal cost. For example, a decision was made to regrade all tee complexes and elevate the majority of them for better visibility. In addition, several improvements were made to the irrigation system, including installation of computer controls for individual sprinkler heads, and the installation of special sprinkler heads around the greens to ensure proper watering. "If we had done this work separately," remarked Dr. Goode, "it would have cost us ten times what we ended up