



## CASE STUDY: NAPERVILLE COUNTRY CLUB

With a storied history dating to 1921, member-owned Naperville Country Club has long been a jewel in the suburbs west of Chicago; but by 2004, Naperville's golf course was beginning to lose its luster.

The club sits on a relatively small parcel of 124 acres. Limited space combined with rolling terrain and mature trees to create difficult playing conditions. "Out of the 35 or 36 full shots on the golf course more than two-thirds of those were either blind, semi-blind or uphill shots. Also the bunkers weren't as good as they could be," recalls golf course architect Steve Forrest, ASGCA, who led the club through its renovation.

To complicate matters, the driving range was too short and narrow and dangerously close to the 16<sup>th</sup> hole. The club's infrastructure was badly in need of overhaul. The irrigation system was deteriorating, and the pump system was obsolete. To accommodate and attract members and guests, more parking was needed as well as additional amenities.

These shortcomings are common at many older golf courses, but key members at Naperville understood the dramatic effect that not acting might have on their club's future.

"Naperville Country Club is essentially a golf club," says long-time member and renovation Project Manager David Tierney. "We don't have a pool. We don't have tennis courts. We do have fine dining and a very nice clubhouse. Our real asset, though, was our golf course, and we had to bring it up to today's standards to be competitive."



Land owner, Delcora Sleight (second from right) in front of the clubhouse (1921).



Irrigation and fitting installation.



Practice tee drainage installation.



Steve Forrest

The club contacted Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest and Associates, an architectural firm that had successfully worked with the club in the past. Naperville’s first idea was to do a “quick fix” to resolve the club’s most glaring issues. A survey of the membership revealed that members wanted to make only limited improvements: upgrade the quality of the bunkers, lengthen the course and improve the short and narrow practice facility. Forrest saw a greater potential in a renovated Naperville golf course. “We came on the property, saw its tremendous beauty with the rolling terrain, the water features and the mature trees. And we had a vision that was quite a bit bigger than what the survey said,” recalls Forrest.

The limited plan was rejected by Naperville’s membership. But instead of giving up, club members, such as David Tierney, realized what was at stake. After hearing Steve Forrest’s vision for a more comprehensive renovation, they decided it was time to act. Committed club members moved forward with several clear objectives in mind.



David Tierney

“We wanted to do it right,” recalls Tierney. “But we didn’t want to spend a considerable amount of time. Being under construction is bad for club morale. The faster you can get it done, the better off you are. We wanted to do it in such a fashion that when we got done with the renovation project, the golf course and its environment would look like it had always been that way. The funding aspect was really the fourth priority, and that’s a little different than the way most people start looking at renovations.”

For the architectural team, the first step was to formulate a Master Plan to elevate Naperville Country Club’s course to its full potential. The Master Plan addressed various items, from tee and greens improvements to ensuring proper drainage and introducing an efficient irrigation system. Other questions addressed included: Are the bunkers situated in the right place? Is the course as long as it can be to accommodate advances in today’s golf technology? Are the irrigation reservoirs large enough?

From countless hours of walking the property, Forrest devised a plan that made the best use of a relatively small property and utilized it in a much more efficient manner than the original layout planned 80 years earlier. His Master Plan – a type of picture frame that shows what you can have – was then fully examined. Refinements were made, then implementation of the plan was discussed. Once the vision was in place, it was up to both the leadership and the architect to get the entire membership on board.



**“I would tell anybody doing a renovation project, the more you can communicate with the members in as many ways possible about where the project is, the better off you are.”**

**David Tierney**

A MASTER PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENTS

# NAPERVILLE COUNTRY CLUB

NAPERVILLE, ILLINOIS

COMPLETED BY:

Arthur Hills / Steve Forrest and Associates  
golf course architects

FEBRUARY 2006



| NO.   | NAME | TYPE | AREA | PERCENT | PERCENT | PERCENT | PERCENT |
|-------|------|------|------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1     | 18   | 18   | 18   | 18      | 18      | 18      | 18      |
| 2     | 17   | 17   | 17   | 17      | 17      | 17      | 17      |
| 3     | 16   | 16   | 16   | 16      | 16      | 16      | 16      |
| 4     | 15   | 15   | 15   | 15      | 15      | 15      | 15      |
| 5     | 14   | 14   | 14   | 14      | 14      | 14      | 14      |
| 6     | 13   | 13   | 13   | 13      | 13      | 13      | 13      |
| 7     | 12   | 12   | 12   | 12      | 12      | 12      | 12      |
| 8     | 11   | 11   | 11   | 11      | 11      | 11      | 11      |
| 9     | 10   | 10   | 10   | 10      | 10      | 10      | 10      |
| 10    | 9    | 9    | 9    | 9       | 9       | 9       | 9       |
| 11    | 8    | 8    | 8    | 8       | 8       | 8       | 8       |
| 12    | 7    | 7    | 7    | 7       | 7       | 7       | 7       |
| 13    | 6    | 6    | 6    | 6       | 6       | 6       | 6       |
| 14    | 5    | 5    | 5    | 5       | 5       | 5       | 5       |
| 15    | 4    | 4    | 4    | 4       | 4       | 4       | 4       |
| 16    | 3    | 3    | 3    | 3       | 3       | 3       | 3       |
| 17    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2       | 2       | 2       | 2       |
| 18    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1       | 1       | 1       | 1       |
| TOTAL |      |      |      |         |         |         |         |

The leadership held a number of town hall-style meetings where Steve Forrest was available. Many members had a difficult time visualizing the layout of the new course, so Forrest took them on walking tours of the course where he placed pylons at the sites of the new holes. This extra effort influenced a favorable vote from the membership.



## Financing the Course Renovation

To finance the renovation, Naperville Country Club leveraged its most valuable asset – the land itself. Prior to securing the loan, an appraisal was conducted. The valuation of \$40 million allowed the club to borrow \$8.5 million at six percent interest. The loan covered most of the costs of renovation. Repayment on the loan is estimated to take between 16 and 20 years. “Our debt to equity ratio was very manageable,” remarks Tierney.

To repay the loan, Naperville Country Club members were asked to pay a fixed, nominal, monthly amount for the life of the loan. This approach was thought to be appealing to club leaders, because it is fair to both current and future members. Today, the members pay approximately \$155 a month into a capital budget fund. Factoring in inflation, this amount will likely increase in the coming years.

This approach is augmented by a 15 percent draw from initiation fees and some private gifts from members.

## Good Stewards of the Environment

In order to get county approval and permits for the renovation, Naperville Country Club was required to implement a design that would maintain a floodway for water runoff and preserve the club’s wetlands.



Tim Anderson, CGCS

As Tim Anderson, Naperville’s Golf Course Superintendent, explains, “We rerouted the golf course floodway and added fill into it. In order to do this, we had to disturb some existing wetland areas. Consequently, we had to mitigate at one and a half times the wetland areas that were disturbed. We actually did more than that. The key focus for the county – which issued the environmental permit – was that we had to show an overall watershed benefit for this particular branch of the watershed where the golf course is located.”



The plan created several acres of environmental habitat that is aesthetically pleasing with its tall grasses and flowers. This area serves as a home for birds and other wildlife and acts as a natural filtration system. As water runs off of the golf course, it is filtered before it goes into the groundwater and the overland flow. The wetlands habitat is off limits to golfers. If they hit their balls into the area, they simply drop another one and proceed forward.

### Reaping the Rewards of Renovating

Planners of the Naperville renovation took care to improve the layout's watershed.

When construction was completed, Naperville Country Club's golf course reopened as a more

efficient, ecologically-sound and player-friendly course.

Attracting new members to Naperville was one of the foremost goals of executing the course renovation. "Without new members, we couldn't exist for long as a private club," says David Tierney. Since September 2007, Naperville has added more than 30 new members and is ahead of schedule in its new member drive.

"The members are just thrilled with the renovation," notes Tierney with a smile. "It is heartwarming to see the juniors out playing with their parents. They can carry their little golf bags up to their own set of tees and say, 'Dad, Mom, these are my tees, and this is where I get to play!' The kids are the future of the club."

The success in recruiting new and satisfied members to Naperville Country Club answered the big, outstanding question posed at the beginning of the process: Could we attract new members with a brand new golf course? The answer is a resounding YES!

### Naperville Country Club Renovation: Expense Allocation

| Item                      | Allocation (%) |
|---------------------------|----------------|
| Golf Course               | 32.36          |
| Maintenance Facility      | 17.03          |
| Irrigation System         | 13.25          |
| NCC Operations            | 12.18          |
| Professional Fees         | 8.61           |
| Parking Lots              | 3.83           |
| Existing Debt             | 3.29           |
| Pump House                | 2.98           |
| Trees                     | 1.66           |
| Halfway House             | 1.46           |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Deep Well | 1.23           |
| Dump                      | 1.07           |
| Permits                   | 1.06           |
| <b>Total</b>              | <b>100%</b>    |



## CASE STUDY: RIVIERA COUNTRY CLUB

The golf course at Riviera Country Club in Coral Gables, FL, boasts an impressive pedigree. It was originally designed in 1924 by legendary golf course architect Donald Ross for patrons of the prestigious Biltmore Hotel. But when Bill Wagner, CCM, came on board as Riviera's General Manager in 1991, he found a course – and a club membership roster – that was in decline. "The greens were fairly worn out," recalls Wagner. "The Donald Ross signature had been taken out of the course after so many years, and it really didn't resemble much of a Donald Ross course anymore." The club was 250 members under cap of golf memberships, and the average age was nearly 72. The quandary was: How do you renovate a club when the member numbers are down, even though the club would be challenged to increase those numbers without a renovated golf club.

Wagner and interested club members knew they needed to improve the course's infrastructure and more. At the same time, they felt that the club's historic roots provided a unique opportunity to capture the attention of members. They took a crash course in Donald Ross's design style and looked for a golf course architect who could stay true to Ross's original vision.

After interviewing several golf course architects, Riviera's leadership decided to hire Brian Silva, ASGCA, an experienced course architect who had rejuvenated other Donald Ross-designed courses. "It had been altered so many times that Brian really put a lot more Donald Ross features into the plan for the course," says Wagner.

The first plan presented to membership included replacing the grass, the greens and a number of trees lost to Hurricane Andrew. However, this plan also called for a new clubhouse. Consequently, it was not approved by the general membership, which included both golf and social members.



Riviera Country Club circa 1980s.



Riviera Country Club under renovation.



Riviera Country Club under renovation.



The ballots for the social members and golf members bore different codes. When the tally was completed, it was discovered that the social members had voted down the renovation but that the golf members had approved it.

“So we went back to just the golf members,” recalls Bill Wagner, CCM, “and we held a vote on just the golf course renovation to be paid for by just the golf members. We were very, very successful with that. In fact, more than 80 percent of golf members voted for the renovation plan, which was financed through long-term, no-interest-bearing loans from the golfing members.” Each golfing member purchased a \$3,500 certificate, which was refundable if the member resigned or downgraded to a social or a non-resident membership.



Bill Wagner, CCM

“It was a fairly easy sell,” says Wagner. “As soon as the golf course was renovated, new members started pouring into the club, and it worked out very well.”

Even with the support of its golfing members, funding Riviera’s renovation had its challenges. Membership had dwindled far below the cap. For club leaders, it was a matter of determining how much current members were willing and able to loan and how much value that money would buy.

To determine the scope of the course renovation, the leadership held focus groups to see what the golf membership was willing to pay for in a renewed golf course. In their calculation, they allowed for the few who would refuse to participate. That loss was more than offset by the funds generated by the number of new members who were projected to join.

The \$1.7 million raised through no-interest loans from its golf members allowed Riviera to renovate many of the greens and the fairway grass. Other important improvements – such as upgrading the irrigation system and installing bunker liners – were deferred.



The first renovation at Riviera Country Club was funded through no-interest loans provided by the club’s golfing members.



Practice areas like this one at Riviera Country Club, are often included in renovation projects.

Thanks in large part to the improved course, Riviera's golf membership increased by 250, and the average age of its membership fell from 72 to 51. Over the next five years, this revitalization accounted for almost \$3.5 million in new revenues. In 2005, the time was right to consider completing the golf course renovation.

The second renovation did not necessitate financing due to the increased number of members and a capital fee plan that had risen to \$75 a month per member. Riviera now had several million dollars in the bank with which to work.

The second renovation cost approximately \$1.8 million and was paid for completely with funds from the club treasury. With these funds, the renovation of the fairways was completed, new bunkers were created and a new, state-of-the-art irrigation system was installed.

Since the earlier course renovation in 1992, Riviera Country Club has never had an assessment or the need for an outside bank loan.

Riviera Country Club is a testament to the role that a revitalized golf course can play in turning around a club's fortunes. Its two course renovations attracted enthusiastic new members and generated increased revenues that paid for the renovation and more. And it taught Bill Wagner, CCM, that keeping facilities current should be an ongoing process.

"Most clubs can't afford not to keep up their facilities," cautions Wagner. "The facilities that are on their way down must have memberships that are on their way down. They have to gut it out and put the money back in it. And I believe that if you have the facilities and you have the willingness to keep them up, there are members out there."

## RESOURCES

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### Allied Associations of Golf

The Allied Associations of Golf can be contacted for further information on remodeling golf courses.

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### **Golf Course Builders Association of America**

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### **Golf Course Superintendents Association of America**

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### **Ladies Professional Golf Association**

100 International Golf Dr.  
Daytona Beach, FL 32124  
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### **National Golf Course Owners Association of America**

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### **National Golf Foundation**

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### **PGA of America**

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Newly reconstructed 14th hole at TPC Potomac, which recently underwent a \$25 million renovation. Photo by James Kim

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA) and the Club Managers Association of America (CMAA) collaborated to create the DVD "Excellence Restored" and this companion workbook.

Thanks to the ASGCA 2007–2008 Executive Committee for their support of this project: President Bruce Charlton, ASGCA; Vice President Doug Carrick, ASGCA; Treasurer Erik Larsen, ASGCA; Secretary Rick Phelps, ASGCA and Immediate Past President Steve Forrest, ASGCA. ASGCA Executive Director Chad Ritterbusch and ASGCA staff members Aileen Smith and Therese Swenson also contributed to this project.

Thanks to CMAA and its staff for its involvement in the production of this publication. Special thanks to Ken Fanelli and Stacy Helfstein for their editorial and graphical contributions.

The Toro Company donated funding and technical expertise to the production of "Excellence Restored." Thanks to John Lawrence, Scott Orth and Dianne Mueller.

Several golf facilities allowed their stories to be told and their grounds to be used for filming and examples. Thanks to the following for their invaluable participation in this project:

Crystal Tree Golf Club, Orland Park, IL

- Les Rutan, Golf Course Superintendent
- Jack Daley

Naperville Country Club, Naperville, IL

- Tim Anderson, Golf Course Superintendent
- David Tierney, Renovation Project Leader

Riviera Golf and Country Club, Coral Gables, FL

- Bill Wagner, CCM, Club Manager

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