

Steps to success

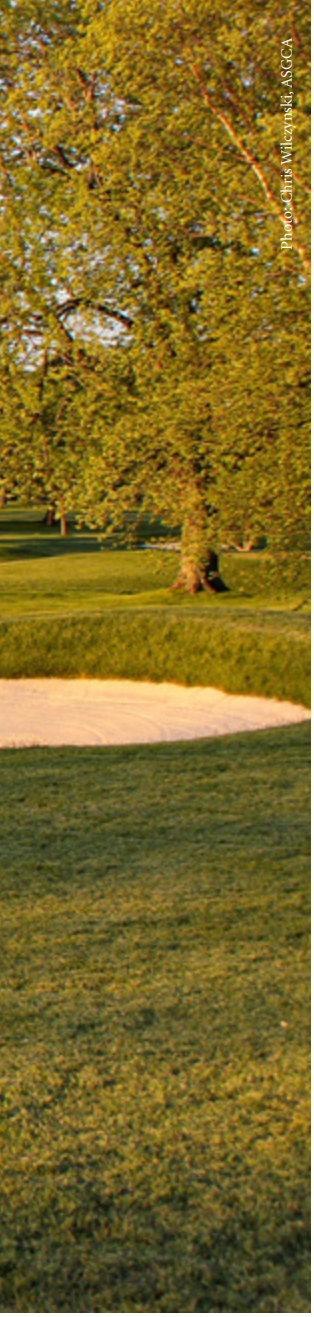
While comprehensive 'blow-up' renovations might grab the headlines, for many golf clubs a phased approach is more appropriate. Richard Humphreys finds out more

Some remarkable golf course transformation projects have taken place over the past decade: from Coore & Crenshaw's restoration of Pinehurst No. 2, which was ground-breaking in its embrace of a natural aesthetic, to Fazio Design's employment of advanced technologies to create Augusta-like surfaces in one of the wettest regions of Europe, at Adare Manor in Ireland.

But most clubs don't have the luxury of eight other courses to play on, or an owner happy to bankroll such a radical change. Closing the doors on the course for a year, or more, is usually simply not feasible.

"Ripping the band-aid off all at once is the preferred way to go, but sometimes clubs just don't have the means to make that large of a commitment or investment and they cannot withstand the extended closure," says Drew Rogers, ASGCA. "Executing projects in smaller, surgical bursts is really the only way they can make progress."

For Kenosha Country Club, one of only two Donald Ross layouts in Wisconsin, a phased approach was the only viable option. The club wanted to spread the cost of changes and remain operational while work was going on.



Photos: Chris Wilczynski, ASGCA





Photos: Drew Rogers, ASGCA

Kenosha Country Club in Wisconsin (above) engaged Drew Rogers, ASGCA, to bring back the original Donald Ross design intent while addressing modern demands. Chris Wilczynski, ASGCA, completed a nine-year project to renovate Wanakah Country Club in New York (left) in 2018

"This is where proper planning and guidance by the architect comes into play, to help the club prioritize the work sequentially so that the improvements follow the overall vision in a consistent manner and so already completed works are not redundantly impacted again," says Rogers.

Kenosha is under way with a thoughtful resurrection of the course's original Donald Ross design intent, plus other improvements to address modern demands related to infrastructure, playability and management.

Added complications

Choosing to phase the work over multiple years does bring difficulties. "As well as complicating some work consistencies and limiting economies of scale, it is also a more ongoing inconvenience to golfers." But Rogers says that this approach was the best and only choice for Kenosha. "Because there is a strong superintendent, leadership and a great relationship with the architect, we can remain laser-focused on details and we can still execute very strategically within the constraints and available resources."

Another club with a Ross layout to have successfully adopted a long-term approach is Hyde Park Golf and Country Club in Cincinnati, Ohio. Tim Liddy, ASGCA, first started work there in 2002, creating a master plan for course improvements.

Course superintendent Pat O'Brien says: "The club was ultimately trying to improve infrastructure, given the failing irrigation system and poor drainage. Tim was also able to raise the discussion about tree removal, returning to the Ross roots while improving playability and infrastructure.

"It made sense financially and the membership was not in favor of a shutdown to accomplish what was in the plan. Tim to this day is still excellent to collaborate with on changes on the course."

"A project like this must have a close understanding and relationship between club manager, golf professional, superintendent and



Photos: Kevin Atkinson, ASGCA





Kevin Atkinson, ASGCA, has worked with an in-house team at The Club at Ravenna in Colorado on recent golf course renovation work. He has reduced the square footage of bunkers by 50 percent

architect," says Liddy. "Any changes would have been an issue but fortunately all have remained—and they have all stayed focused on the guidance of the master plan."

"The membership is happy with the strategy," says O'Brien. "The ease of budgeting allows for our team to engage on annual basis in changes to the course."

Staying efficient

The financial trade-off for spreading the work over multiple years is typically a higher total cost—clubs that can afford to close their doors can reap economies of scale. But doing work in smaller chunks can bring its own efficiencies.

At The Club at Ravenna in Littleton, Colorado, Kevin Atkinson, ASGCA, has worked with an in-house team on almost all of the golf course renovation work. He estimates that by having club staff undertake renovation work alongside their existing maintenance duties, the work is 40 percent cheaper than bringing in a contractor.

When the club opened in 2006, it had 160,000 square feet of bunkers, and greens that were severely contoured, resulting in tough conditions for players. "One of the primary goals of our ongoing project, which began in 2014, has been to make the course more playable for members, so they could actually enjoy playing golf time and time again," says Atkinson.

Reducing the maintenance burden has also been a priority. "We have reduced the sand bunkers to 80,000 square feet and rebuilt, or softened, greens," says Atkinson. "By utilizing the latest research findings from Michigan State University, we saved nearly $100,000 in material costs, just in the greens.

"Because of the method of how we build things, it gives the owner and

the staff a great opportunity to fit projects in their normal schedule—most clubs wouldn't have that opportunity. For instance, once they have done their typical maintenance routine in the morning, they can go into projects in the afternoon, as well as taking advantage of two-to-three hours here or there, while most clubs need a golf contractor on site the whole time and pay them for it. This project allows the club to pick away at projects and fit it into their schedule of golf operations."

Steve Datwyler, the club's superintendent, says: "After identifying that our productivity was limited by the equipment, we purchased a track skid steer and a mini excavator, which greatly accelerated the pace and quality of our work."

Managing expectations

Atkinson is careful to advise clubs on the complexities of carrying out a long-term plan. "The course can feel, from a membership point of view, like it is always under construction," he says. "That is the dynamic I find most complicated—it is much easier to shut it down and do everything you want. However, that approach for a lot of courses is not financially feasible. You shut the course down, you might lose half your members, because they don't have anywhere to play."

Datwyler adds: "The biggest trial was making the transition back to golf course maintenance. The most humbling experience was in 2018 when we were wrapping up a large-scale project that lasted into early June. We struggled a good part of that season to keep up with maintenance and we learned that we should never over-extend our abilities at the expense of the golf course conditions."

> "This project allows the club to pick away at projects and fit it into their schedule of golf operations

When the course opened in 2005, membership was at 80, but following renovation work, the club now has around 300 members.

"It's not only been the best choice for the club from a financial point of view, but it also allows the superintendent to maintain consistency amongst his maintenance crew," says Atkinson. "Typically for seasonal labor, different people would come in and out. But he keeps them on all year round, which allows projects to get done in the off season. The club continues to pay the wages of this crew but that is a drop in the bucket compared to having to always retrain a crew and then have typical golf construction costs."

Datwyler adds: "The phased approach was an excellent choice in our particular situation. We were looking for a cost-effective approach to tackling the project and the in-house option allowed us to pick off the 'low hanging fruit,' complete the majority of work on our own timeline, and did not require a large upfront financial investment. Taking on a few renovation projects each off-season provided a fresh playing experience each spring for our members."

Member buy-in

Small steps can help build members' confidence in the long-term goal.

"I think, if they could afford it, most would choose to make the desired improvements all at once," says Dave Heatwole, ASGCA. While working at Bonnie Briar Country



The master plan that David Heatwole, ASGCA, created for Bonnie Briar Country Club in New York evolved during the project to focus on enhancing the course's playability



Photos: Dave Heatwole, ASGCA

Club in Westchester County, New York, he says one motivation for a phased approach was getting the membership to understand the value of investing money into their greatest asset, the golf course.

"We began with some tee renovation work as the overall master plan was being developed," he said. "Over the next four-to-five years we implemented many of the items contained within the master plan. Many of those items were the basic infrastructure of the course including tree and brush removal, drainage projects, and stream restoration."

Chris Wilczynski, ASGCA, approached the renovation of Wanakah Country Club near Buffalo, New York, by doing two-to-four holes a year. "The club moved forward with the first phase of the renovation in 2009," he says. "This was the first test run with the goal of getting the membership to buy into the process and the improved course.

"Most of the golf course was flat, and drained poorly. Our recommendation was to regrade the poorly draining holes and create a minimum slope gradient of three percent, and add underground drainage. We were also able to convince the membership that we should rebuild the tees and bunkers and expand the greens back to their original shapes and design intent. We also proposed to remove several hundred trees."

Such ambitious plans can make stakeholders nervous. But after the initial phase in 2009, members approved and Wilczynski completed five further phases over the following eight years, allowing play to continue at all times.

> "We proved that a multi-phased project could work

Staying on track

When changes are being implemented over a long timeframe, maintaining consistency and continuity can be challenging.

"Throughout the entire process we have had many changes of club representatives including about seven or eight club presidents, about five or six greens chairmen, a couple of general managers and thankfully only one superintendent", says Heatwole, of the Bonnie Briar project. "While each club representative has had slightly different priorities, we have managed to maintain a consistent focus on the club's original goals and objectives for the overall facility."

Three different contractors were used in Wilczynski's Wanakah renovation. "The continuity and cohesiveness of the work was challenging because of the different construction personnel doing the work," says Wilczynski. "We also did not always know when the next phase would resume or how much work we could accomplish in each phase because the club had to approve the work from one phase to the next.

"The fact that the project was carried out over a nine-year period was also a challenge. As an architect, my eye evolved and it was challenging to keep consistency with the finished work.

"I am satisfied because the club is thrilled and the members love the renovated course. The course drains well and the membership gets to play more golf because of the improved drainage. We exceeded expectations and delivered a first-class project where each phase was completed on time and budget.

"We proved that a multi-phased project could work."



Photos: Chris Wilczynski, ASGCA

Wilczynski's work at Wanakah CC, where he completed two-to-four holes a year over a nine-year period, included addressing poorly-draining holes



ASGCA Past President Tom Clark, ASGCA, has renovated all 27 holes at Shangri-La Golf Club in Oklahoma. The project has been so successful that the club is considering adding another nine and a par-three layout



Photos: Mike Klemme

Moving forward

The approach worked at Bonnie Briar, too; membership numbers increased, as did the club's profile through the early years of Heatwole's master plan. "With a stronger membership and better financial situation, the club then realized it was time to update the master plan as we began to think about course improvements for the next ten years. As we developed phase two of the master plan, we began to focus on the playability of the golf course, the restoration of the bunkers, rebuilding a few greens that did not match the original style, the expansion of a few of the existing greens, irrigation and drainage improvements, as well as adding new short game practice areas."

ASGCA Past President Tom Clark, ASGCA, references his work at the 27-hole Shangri-La Golf Club in Monkey Island, Oklahoma. "We would work on one nine, leaving 18 holes in play, then move onto the next nine, and so on."

Having successfully completed renovation work on all 27 holes, the club is now considering adding a new par-three course and a driving range. "This would take some pressure off the current 27 holes and will also provide an entertainment venue for the newly completed hotel and its guests," says Clark. "The final piece of the puzzle will be an additional nine holes to bring the course back to its original 36 holes.

"A long-term approach was absolutely the right method for the club as it kept the membership happy. When the owner took over the golf facility with 36 holes, I think he had 50 members. Now they have 600—it has worked out tremendously well."

"All clubs benefit from solid long-range planning programs," says Rogers. "It's important for the club to understand where they're going and why, so they can remain steadfast, focused, consistent and fiscally responsible. Leadership at private clubs is also ever-changing and by having a solid plan adopted and in place, it becomes the roadmap that is deferred to, no matter how many times the faces change. After all, if the club makes an investment to develop such a plan, it's like throwing that money away to go in a different direction." ●

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