

Stick or twist?

Golf may have boomed, but the wider economic outlook remains uncertain. Richard Humphreys considers whether clubs should proceed with caution or press ahead with new investments.

The well-documented boom in golf provided most clubs with a boost in fortunes. As the 'waiting list' made its return to the industry's vocabulary, bank balances swelled, and a renewed sense of confidence emerged. Thoughts quickly turned to how the money could be spent and, after years of deferred maintenance, course projects have been high on the agenda.

Meanwhile, the wider global economy is exhibiting more hesitance. As nations were counting the cost of the pandemic, war began in Ukraine, energy prices rocketed, and supply chains faltered. Even in the US, which is faring better than many golfing nations, growth has slowed, and inflation persisted.

"With the growth in rounds played in recent years, golf facilities are



Bill Shonk, general manager at Princess Anne CC, examines plans with Jordan Spitler, the club's director of golf course maintenance and club grounds



Photo: Wee Burn CC

ASGCA Past President Tom Marzolf has overseen "steady improvement" at Wee Burn over the past two decades

Photo: Princess Anne CC

experiencing economic stability," says ASGCA Past President Tom Marzolf of Fazio Design. "In the US, roughly 50 percent of clubs have a full membership and a waiting list."

Take the example of Princess Anne CC in Virginia. General manager Bill Shonk says: "The demand to join Princess Anne has never been higher. We have a waiting list of over 100. And while costs continue to inflate, our membership has supported increases in our initiation fees and dues."

Clubs are now able to cover their running costs, with money left over for improvements. "They are ready to move forward with deferred maintenance projects and lifecycle component replacements that had been neglected in the past," says Marzolf.

Shawn Smith, ASGCA, of Hills Forrest Smith, is experiencing the same: "Even with increased material costs and a higher demand for contractors, we continue to see clubs reinvest in their facilities so they can compete with those that have made improvements in recent years."

"As the world went back to work after Covid, demand for unavailable goods led to very high inflation that continues worldwide and is impacting supply chains," says Marzolf, adding that labor, deliveries, irrigation systems and sod shipments were all affected. "Inflation makes the current economic situation more expensive to proceed with, in comparison to pre-pandemic pricing. Many clubs have pushed on to spend and complete projects, feeling the need to satisfy the demand for quality golf in a competitive market, with some contractors now booked out into 2025."

So, what should clubs do next?

Ready to move

Steve Henke, the owner of Henke Development Group, which has clubs throughout Indiana, says it makes sense to press ahead: "Now and the next 12 months is a good time for clubs to invest, assuming they have funds to do so. Prices will be more competitive, but I always like to do the preparation work in down times, so everything is ready when the good times arrive. Most wait for the good times and then have to pay for higher construction costs."

Such optimism is driving a change in the way clubs are approaching projects, too.



Photo: Hills Forrest Smith

Hills Forrest Smith has assisted Bonita Bay Club with its multi-course renovation plan, including on the Marsh layout

"Clubs are scrambling to line up quality builders *first*, and completing plans and permits second," says Marzolf. "As a golf course architect working in the industry since the early 1980s, this is the first time we have seen this frenzy create a marketplace that favors golf contractors over price-sensitive clubs."

Smith agrees: "The supply chain issues and increased demand for contractors have necessitated that clubs begin their planning process further in advance. Projects that might have been bid out a year in advance are now 18 months-to-two years. We are also seeing more clubs foregoing the bidding process and negotiating directly with one contractor to lock them in earlier. Owners are also purchasing materials directly from the supplier, before selecting a contractor, to shorten lead times and reduce costs."

Stick to the plan

So how should clubs approach new investments? Marzolf says that preparing a long-range masterplan that clearly identifies lifecycle replacements of aging golf course infrastructure is the prudent way to proceed.

He points to the example of Wee Burn CC in Darien, Connecticut, which has been working to a masterplan since 2000. "The club has smartly stayed the course and continues to set the standard of excellence in the area," says Marzolf. Wee Burn's plan has seen them tick off new maintenance and practice facilities, updated tees, bunkers and greens, irrigation upgrades, and the installation of PrecisionAire units. "The result is perhaps the finest example of steady improvement and commitment to a plan that one could imagine," says Marzolf. "Wee Burn sets the benchmark on smart governance."

Both Marzolf and Smith have worked at Florida's Bonita Bay Club in recent years, with Hills Forrest Smith responsible for work on the club's Bay Island and Marsh courses, and in planning on the Creekside layout, while Fazio Design has updated the Cypress layout and is working on the Sabal course this year.

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Photo: Griffin Haddad/@birdwatchersgolf

"For each course, there was a series of meetings with the club's committee and key individuals to establish goals and objectives as well as review feedback on the proposed improvements," says Smith. "Despite potential setbacks like Covid and Hurricane Ian, the club is sticking to its ambitious plan, and they are well positioned to be highly competitive in the southwest Florida market."

Smith says the 'model' approach "begins with developing a masterplan to show the club the needs of the golf course, identify opportunities for improvement, and budget accordingly. This can be through a series of projects, or one large-scale project."



Photo: Griffin Haddad/@birdwatchersgolf

The thirteenth green at Harrison Lake in Indiana. Top, ASGCA Fellow Tim Liddy, and club owner Bob Haddad (foreground) oversaw renovation work on the course where playability and interest were central to the masterplan

Appealing to all

Bob Haddad, owner of Harrison Lake CC in Columbus, Indiana, gave the green light to golf investment. His course reopened in August 2022 following a renovation by ASGCA Fellow Tim Liddy, which included updating bunkers and a rerouting that involved the creation of five new holes. Haddad emphasizes the importance of broad appeal, though. "Creating compelling reasons for people to visit and enjoy the club will always be the best plan," he says.

Henke agrees: "Clubs must have something for everybody," he



"If we can do courses with more options, we'll have a healthy game," says ASGCA Past President Rees Jones, who has recently renovated the Old Course at Broken Sound in Florida

says. "They need to adapt to the changing times."

Playability is an obvious starting point.

ASGCA Past President Rees Jones says that it will be important for years to come for courses to be more playable for the average golfer.

"When you go in to change a course, there's a bit of fear from the members," he says. "There's fear from the good players that the course will be dumbed down and fear from the average players that it will become too hard."

The magic formula is to satisfy both. Jones recently completed work on the Old Course at Broken Sound in Boca Raton, Florida, which will host the PGA Champions Tour in early November. "We had to design it for the senior players as well as the members, so it had to have really good greens, but they also needed to be accessible," he says. "There are also plenty of different choices – if we can do courses with more options, we'll have a healthy game.

"In the future we'll be getting a lot of less proficient golfers coming into the sport. So, we'll be doing more things around the greens, rather than surrounding them with sand. Chipping areas, grass bunkers and grass pockets. And even if you have a slightly elevated green, we'll design a ramp."

Haddad agrees: "Courses need to be designed for the average golfer. They need to be challenging, yes, but also fun. Investing in the course and in the practice facilities with a 'family and friend fun' approach is the best path to future success. Most clubs are not going to become the next big destination. For most golf courses, their customers come from the local area. The 'vacation in your own backyard' will become an attractive family alternative.

"Short courses, short-game areas, ranges and putting greens should be designed to accommodate groups learning and having fun. There are so many ways to take golf and make it interesting, challenging, and attractive for everyone."

"Great golf architecture transcends all," says Richard Mandell, ASGCA. "The future of golf is to make sure that it has a lasting appeal to as many people as possible, it doesn't matter if there's a pandemic or a recession, we just have to continue to make golf fun and enjoyable."

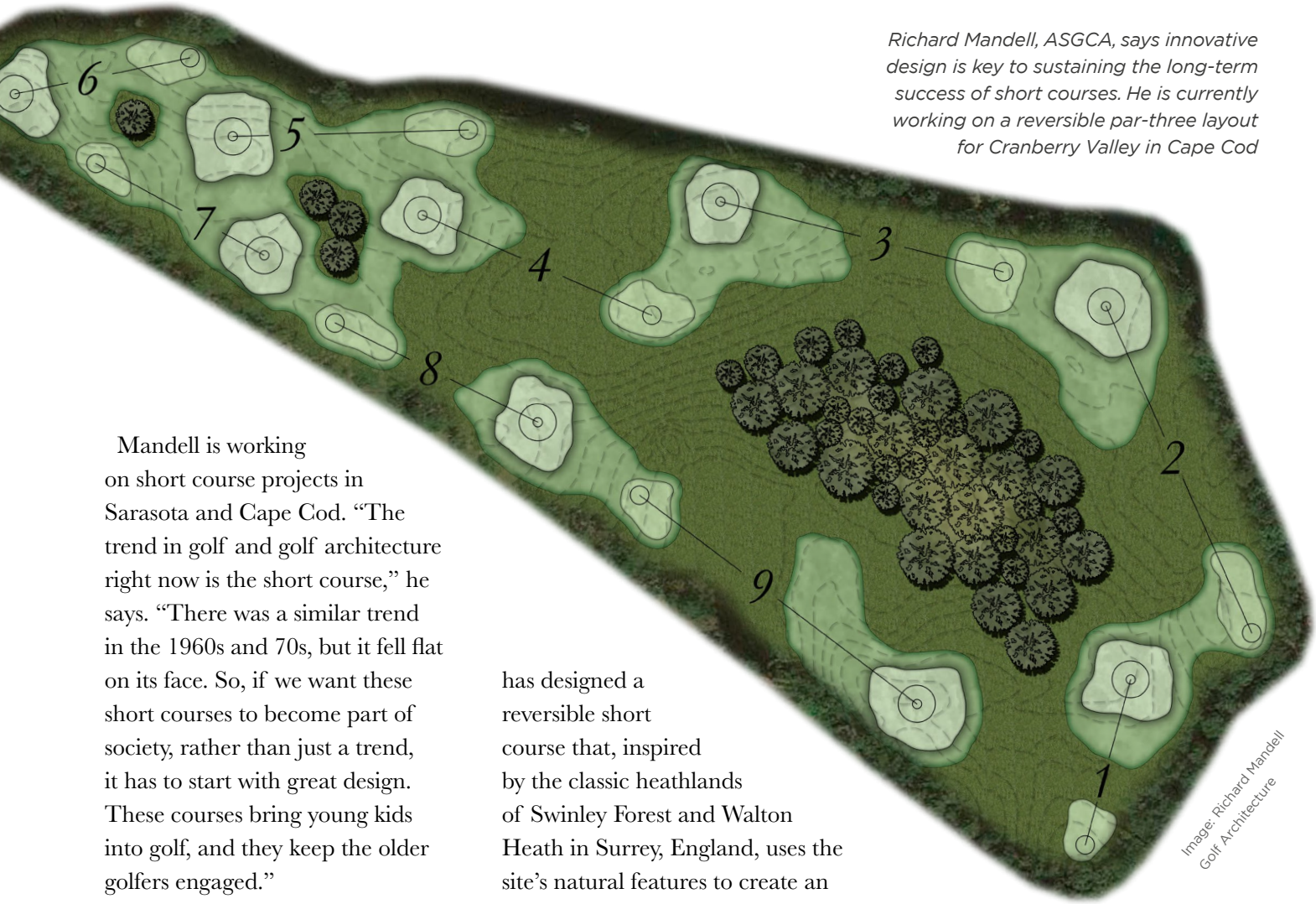


Image: Richard Mandell Golf Architecture

Richard Mandell, ASGCA, says innovative design is key to sustaining the long-term success of short courses. He is currently working on a reversible par-three layout for Cranberry Valley in Cape Cod

Mandell is working on short course projects in Sarasota and Cape Cod. "The trend in golf and golf architecture right now is the short course," he says. "There was a similar trend in the 1960s and 70s, but it fell flat on its face. So, if we want these short courses to become part of society, rather than just a trend, it has to start with great design. These courses bring young kids into golf, and they keep the older golfers engaged."

Mandell's Sarasota project is an adjustable layout that has nine greens complexes and a selection of tees that allow it to be played in five or six different ways.

His Cape Cod project is for Cranberry Valley, which already has an eighteen-hole course, but wanted to utilize a nine-acre triangular parcel between the fourteen and eighteenth holes. Mandell has designed a reversible short course that, inspired by the classic heathlands of Swinley Forest and Walton Heath in Surrey, England, uses the site's natural features to create an interesting golf experience.

"Short courses are here to stay," says Tom Smith, former general manager of Falling Rock at Nemacolin, now a SVP in Wilson, Arkansas, where a six-hole reversible course opens in May "They are fun, functional and inclusive. The model approach should always be to provide what the customer is seeking: Topgolf and others have discovered that by bringing the sport closer to larger cities.

"Now that golf has experienced a boom, it's vital to keep the momentum, provide members with what they are seeking and turn those new golfers into fanatics by investing wisely. I believe clubs that focus on great design and a superior on- and off-course experience are going to be successful."

"Golf is in a good spot right now," says Mandell. "It's healthy and innovative from a design standpoint. We're thinking outside the box more and more, we're bringing out the genius of the place, marketing the golf course more, and doing inspired design, even if it's just one bunker. The future looks bright." ●

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