

Personal Golf Courses

What's a good way to entertain and maybe even impress a President? Invite him to play a round on golf on your own backyard golf course. At least that worked for publisher Walter J. Annenberg with Ronald Reagan and commentator Lowell Thomas with Dwight Eisenhower, both who built courses on their estates.

Tennis isn't status anymore. A Har-Tru tennis court might cost \$40,000 to build. And while personal jets, yachts, and stables are still more exclusive playthings, golf courses are ultimate boy-toys. Consider that the popular business Learjet 31A costs \$5.4 million and costs about \$350,000 for upkeep, a pro-quality golf course will cost more both to build and maintain.

"Price is no object" must be the credo of private course aspirants. Eighteen pro-grade holes require first of all a parcel of about 180 acres of land to spare. In convenient, affluent neighborhoods an acre building lot might sell for as much as half a million dollars. The average course costs about \$5 million just for construction or \$200,000 to \$300,000 a hole. Depending on the part of the country its located, the bill for annual maintenance ranges from \$500,000 to a cool million dollars.

Special irrigation and landscaping can push the budget sky high. The 18 hole Shadow Creek course in Los Vegas that Tom Fazio designed in 1989 for Steve Winn's Mirage Resorts cost well over \$35 million. Planting 2000 grown specimens of three types of pines made the course the most expensive in the US. Of course when the Japanese blast the top of a mountain level to create a links, the finished course can weigh in at over a \$100,000,000!

Who can afford the private version of a member's only club. "As rich as Rockefeller" answers the musical question. John D. Senior started the trend on his several thousand acre Pocantico estate in Tarrytown NY. A modest four holes predating the Landmark Kykuit mansion, it was built by the premier golf course architect of his day, Willy Dunn in 1902. It was expanded in 1937 to 9 greens (and a practice putting green) played in a circle, out and back for a total round of 18 holes.

Even though Kykuit has been given to the National Trust, the golf course that adjoins it is still the played on by the extended Rockefeller family and their guests. Since the Rockefeller clan still can afford a massive grounds crew to maintain it, the course is kept on par with the finest of privates clubs. And, it boasts eighteen of Nelson Rockefeller's collection of monumental sculptures by modern masters. What other course has a Henry Moore accessorizing the practice green?

The granddaddy of media mogul courses was developed by Lowell Thomas on his 2400 acre Quaker Hill estate in Pawling NY. Thomas a famous CBS war correspondent had a radio, tv, and film studio on his estate where he did his broadcasts. An owner of Cinerama and a producer of many travelogues that used this pioneering film process, he made several fortunes. He also was a founder of a little known media company called Capital Cities that eventually grew up to acquire ABC only to recently be devoured by Mickey Mouse and his Disney empire.

Thomas built a ski hill, water skiing lake, and in 1953 an eleven tee, nine green golf course on his

property. The course was as idiosyncratic as the gentleman. The first hole was a blind par four that had to be hit through a notch in the trees. The fourth hole was billed as the shortest hole in the world, a 68 yard par three. The ninth was a 685 yard double dog leg lake crossing par eight, claimed to be the world's longest hole. Besides President Eisenhower, Thomas hosted a wide range of friends and celebrities on his course. Ed Murrow played along with professional athletes. Arctic explorers with volcanologists, and spelunkers. But golf ball manufacturers probably loved the course the best. It was routine to lose a box of balls a round.

The LT course hasn't fared as well as JDR's. The estate passed in 1981 to Denver University as a conference center. Then it was acquired by the film producer, Dino De Laurentis who gutted the main house and never rebuilt it. Alan Gordon, Edward's brother bought it and sold it to Edgar J. Bronfman Jr. in 1991 for \$3 million who commutes to it from NYC by helicopter. (He still doesn't have a permit to build a heliport there.)

By this time the estate had shrunk to 300 acres and the once noble course that once had its own full-time maintenance staff of five is in shambles. Deer nibble the old fairways and the greens haven't seen a mower, sprayer, or aerator in years. Bronfman Jr. and family occupy the old studio, barn, library complex of the estate. Sadly, the main house is still derelict.

One recent high-profile pocket-sized course was finished last year for Edward S. Gordon at his Bridgehampton estate. Designed by Rees Jones who designed the Atlantic Club next door in 1992, Gordon got 4 greens and 9 fairways on only 30 acres for 1 million dollars in construction and about another million in landscaping costs. He has a live-in caretaker who together with his son maintain the course.

Those who have played the course proclaim it as "spectacular." Jones did a brilliant job creating a course that plays differently despite the limited number of greens. Actually, the greens are wildly oversized. One 12,000 square foot one accommodates three holes and the three other 7,000 sq ft ones have 2 cups each. Players can see the ocean from certain fairways.

Gordon will not comment on what possessed him to build across the street from a great golf club that he already paid a lot to belong to. Some venture that he picked up the idea from his brother's old Pawling house. Others attribute it as his accommodation to his wife's avid interest in the sport. One apocryphal story, has him making a call on the empty Atlantic course only to be informed by a course official that the club rules strictly prohibit cell phone usage on the course. Annoyed, he vowed to build his own better course where only he made the rules.

Golf courses of moguls with major money quietly dot the country side. Shopping center developer Melvin Simon has a 13 green, 27 hole Steve Smyers designed course on 90 acres in Indianapolis. Smyers also did a 60 acre 18 hole course for golf pro Nick Faldo on his estate outside of London. Movie producer David L. Wolper has a nine hole course on 35 acres in Napa CA. Kenny Rogers has a course outside Athena, Georgia. Industrialist Dennis Washington has a Robert Trent Jones Jr. designed 15 acre 9-hole course on an island in British Columbia. Outside of Savannah, banker Gaith Phrone has a \$4 million, 18- hole course built in 1986. Although he spends \$700,000 a year to maintain it he can't play there. Reportedly, he is in exile avoiding deportation. (To be checked!)

Those with or without the spread and dough for divots can opt to put in putting greens. Alex Bik put a 7000 square foot green on his estate in Greenwich CT. eight years ago. Even with every other day care, its "difficult to keep perfect" but certainly "a thing of beauty." In any upscale area, several homes with putting greens are generally available on the market if you look carefully enough. For example, Sotheby's lists a \$3,700,000 H.T. Lindeberg designed Tudor-style on five acres in Lattingtown LI with its own putting green.

But limiting one's golf exposure to just a green is still a costly option. Pro greens today run typically run 4500-8000 square feet. The green budget when building a whole course is about three dollars a square foot. Depending on the terrain, this can double or triple when doing just a single green. A home owner must have a sunny part of the lawn with good air circulation to devote. Excavators must dig out 18" of soil and shape the subgrade. The green is built up with four inches of gravel, two inches of sand and a foot of special soil mix in order for the special bent grass to grow and drain properly.

Look up "high maintenance in the directory and you'll find a picture of a golf green. One owner compared the upkeep to "a second wife." Greens must be cut once a day. The special mower runs about \$4,000. They must be watered, fertilized, aerated constantly and sprayed for bugs and funguses. A sprayer is another \$3,000. The morning dew must be blown off so the green won't burn. Burnt and worn patches must be plugged. Few homeowners have the patience or expertise to care for a green properly. One popular solution, at least for golfers with course-side homes, is to arrange for the club grounds keepers to do your private green on their daily rounds.

Another solution is to sacrifice the natural emerald splendor of a grass green and install a ultra practical, low maintenance synthetic turf. The green surface is made of a knitted nylon synthetic and has a silica top dressing to vary the speed of the green. This option is more costly at \$16-20 a square foot but the only upkeep is an inexpensive redressing once a year. Pros Dave Pelz, Ben Crenshaw, and Payne Stewart have taken this route. So did Shaquille O'Neal who spent more than \$100,000 on a single synthetic green surrounded by 25 small traps and bunkers in the yard of his Orlando, FL home.

Dr. Robert Reiner put a \$16,000 750 square foot green with 5 tee spots at his home in Quogue with motion sensitive, solar powered lighting. He can walk on his course at 9PM and just begin to play. He finds the green "terrific" for practicing putting but too hard to hold chip shots as well as a bent grass green. A psychologist who "can't sit still," he is more confident on his wedge shots and has taken four strokes off his handicap in one year. He loves to use it to entertain and his guest play his course for money.

Of course the best way to build a green is to have someone else pay for it and maintain it. This is known in the trade as the "Dan Quayle solution." As Vice President, Quayle got private donors to contribute to install a Tom Marzolf-designed putting green on the grounds of the Naval Observatory Vice Presidential residence. Al Gore reputedly tore it out and put in a volley ball court. (Denied by the press office). But President Clinton took a page from Quayle and put in a 1,500 square foot Robert Trent Jones Jr designed green with little presidential flags marking each of its three cups. The

\$23,000 was donated by Friends of Bill and the green is maintained by the existing grounds staff.
Who said a Democrat can't learn new tricks from a Republican.

If you already have your topographic survey in hand, for further information on designing a private course contact:

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