

The Core of the Course

By: Nathan Crace Date: May 25 2002

When was the last time you played a new golf course and saw no residential golf development within it? I mean absolutely none. Zero. Zilch. Nada. When you didn't have to cross a street to get to the next tee and someone's dog wasn't barking at you on the tee from within the cozy confines of its invisible fence? Save for the occasional municipal project funded by tax dollars or bond financing, you may be hard-pressed to think of such a course that has been built recently. Sure there are a few notable exceptions, but it's basic economics with a dash of business sense: build a golf course to attract homebuyers and the proceeds from the lots will help offset the costs associated with building the golf course. Everybody wins. Right? Does anyone really expect a developer to invest a few million dollars into a golf course and not try to see a return on the money as quickly as possible? Who wants to wait for the course to start producing enough cash flow to service a note when real estate can do so almost instantaneously? And so enters the need for residential development—a "necessary evil" as I've heard some refer to it in the past—to offset construction and operating costs.

Don't get me wrong: the home sites don't have to be "evil" if they are well-planned. If the developer doesn't pressure the architect to cram as much golf as possible into as small a space as the developer feels is needed or if the owner is even slightly more concerned about the golf course than the home sites to the point that he or she insists that the land planner work with the golf course architect to achieve a finely tuned balance between golf and real estate, then the end result can be pleasing. However, we've all played courses where one stands on the tee of a formidably long par 4 with the green some 400+ yards away at the other end of "condo canyon." Courses where only the myopic can enjoy the course without auspiciously large homes crowding one's peripheral vision. We wonder, "Why doesn't anyone build a course like the one I grew up on with no homes looming over my head on the tee?" Quite simply: because it's just too expensive. But don't be too quick to blame it on the developers. Consider this possibility: golfers now demand new technology that helps them hit the ball farther and this means courses have to be longer. Consequently, additional length requires more land and as the old saying goes, "They're not making any more land." Therefore, what land there is available is typically expensive if it's in an area where a golf course would perform well. And what's the most economically feasible way to offset the land costs? Real estate development—and lots of it.

Without the aid of a scientific survey, I would surmise that the vast majority of golfers would prefer to play any given golf course without residential development interspersed throughout. "Core courses" as they are referred to in golf architecture circles are purely golf—no development within the course itself. No feeling of playing through someone's backyard on a tiny swath of green grass. The beginnings of golf were raised on core courses. No one would have imagined building a 300 unit condominium complex on that sand dune near the 4th green at St. Andrew's because there was "a nice view of the water from over there." Core courses are great, but increasingly becoming unrealistic in today's financially driven world. Sure you have the occasional multi-millionaire who takes a few hundred acres of his family's land that's been passed down through the generations, hires one of the elite in golf course architecture, and builds a gem of a course near a hotbed of golf or a resort area. And I say kudos to them! But for the most part, we are charged with balancing golf with real estate. Protecting the interest of the course while maximizing lots with golf course frontage. Providing ample room for errant shots to remain in bounds while enabling homeowners to have some semblance of a back yard. It's become an increasingly ominous task with so much of each piece of property now off limits for one reason or another. Not that I mind a well-planned residential golf development—there are plenty of them to be found that were designed with the golf course first on the list of developer priorities. There are also a number of older core courses with well-planned residential developments now adjacent to them on the outside. But when compared to courses that weave in and out of home sites, highways, and commercial property, core courses provide some of the most memorable golfing experiences you will ever experience. Their park-like settings are like no other. Learn to appreciate them for what they are—an apparently dying breed of course that is growing increasingly more difficult to build in contemporary times. I was asked if there was a future in core golf courses. Given the glorious history of their past, let's hope all we know about core courses ten years from now isn't a handful of old courses no one wants to play anymore because they are only 6,900 yards long!

The topic for this column was submitted by Woody H. of Hilton Head Island, SC. Nathan Crace is the Senior Design Associate at Maxwell Golf Group in Jackson, Mississippi. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2002.