

Off course for change

By JEREMY PERN

Sparrowhawks and kestrels died out on our farm when I was a boy. At the top of the food chain, they were the most vulnerable to poisoning. In England during the late 50's rabbits were not cuddly bunnies, but blind, suppurating bundles of wet fur. The effects of myxomatosis were nightmarish to a nine year old, whose duty was to bash to death the trembling, but otherwise immobile, creatures. A few years later, as a longhaired hippie student of agriculture and co-editor of a subversive college magazine, I became involved in the environmental issues of the day. They centred on agriculture and the "Silent Spring" poisons that had wiped out the birds of prey in Sussex.

In 1975 I set foot on a golf course construction site for the first time. Before the 1980's there were no significant environmental problems affecting golf courses. By 1990 it had become the biggest single issue facing new golf course developments in Europe and many other parts of the world. "Ecology" had arrived, and in just ten years golf morphed from a quirky game for middle class enthusiasts to a soft target of the hard left and their fellow travellers, the militant greens.

Quite rightly, environmental legislation within the European Union has been aimed at governing environmental management methods, controlling water resources, quality and consumption and developing planning controls through the use of environmental impact assessments, monitoring programmes, local awareness schemes, inspection and policing. Non-EU countries like Switzerland and Norway have followed suit.

In less than a single generation golf course development has moved from carefree ignorance to a state of political correctness. Flower power freedoms of the sixties and seventies have been replaced with the ecological thought police of today. But between the rapacious developers and the radical greens lies a space where two groups of professionals seek workable compromise. On one side: the project designers, architects and builders who have to produce schemes and concepts that earn their paymasters approval as well as meeting current legislation and socio-cultural standards. On the other side sit the land planners, with responsibility for granting construction approvals in line with the law.

In most development professions such as civil engineering and building construction, both sides broadly understand the language spoken by the other. This happy state of affairs does not apply to golf course developments. Confusion reigns.

The only commonality found in golf course developments in different countries and regions

seems to be the hostility with which such developments are viewed by significant proportions of a misinformed and thus ignorant population.

Since 1990 I have worked on golf course planning applications in the UK, France, Belgium, Austria, Germany, Norway, Croatia, Hungary, Switzerland, Germany and Poland. Two things stand out.

First: the inability of local planners to comprehend the underlying thrust of current environmental legislation. This ignorance leads to fear of making the wrong decisions and being duly chastised for incompetence. This in turn results in administrative "decision-free zones". Project plans are hustled from one department to another, reports are read, revised and new ones requested, decisions are made to make decisions about decisions when other decisions have been made. Imagine a Monty Python version of "Nineteen Eighty



Four", with screen play by Kafka: but suspend your disbelief, this is the new reality.

Second: the ignorance of the golf industry - especially within the various golf federations - concerning environmental and land planning aspects of new golf course developments.

In the eyes of the general public the golf industry is led by the R&A, the EGA and the national golf federations, together with the professional players represented by the various PGA's and the European Tour. A long way behind come the professional organisations representing greenkeepers, club directors, constructors, consultants, architects and so on, and quite recently the commercial golf owners (who have, at long last, begun to establish their voice within the industry). Last, but by no means least, come the thousands of commercial companies who manufacture and supply equipment and products to golf courses and players.

The golf industry's response to the environmental anti-golf criticism has been to concentrate on the 'birds and bees' aspects of existing golf club management. Realising that golf had a huge image problem, the R&A created partnership links in the early 1990's with the European Golf Association (EGA) and the PGA that resulted

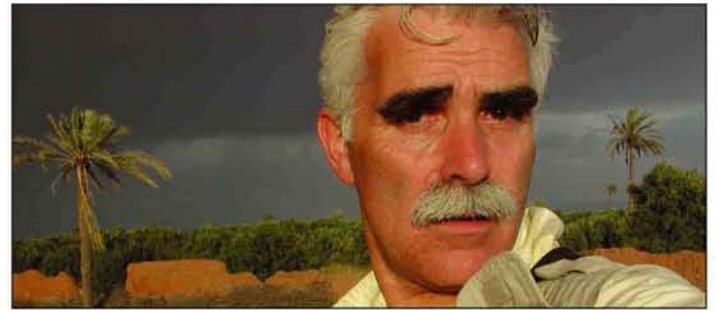
initially in the establishment of the EGA Ecology Unit. A year or two later the Ecology Unit was replaced by the Committed to Green (CtoG) organisation.

As the golf industry's environmental flagship organisation, directly aided and supported by EU funding for publications and projects, C to G did essential and quality work aimed primarily at existing golf courses. In 2003, just before the R&A (et al) hit the 'Eject' button and C to G nose-dived into freefall, its funding slashed by its founder, plans were afoot to start looking seriously at new golf course developments.

Ten years ago the golf industry started to deal with the environmental aspects of golf course management. Since then the situation regarding the development of new courses in Europe and the planning approval systems has deteriorated quite

alarmingly. Across the Continent dozens, if not hundreds of golf course projects await planning approval. This does not include the projects that will never be given planning permits for quite legitimate reasons, such as water shortage or negative environmental impact.

In countries like Portugal and Spain golf is no longer just a sport, it is an integral part of the local economy. The Greek and Croatian governments have been trying to encourage developers to invest in tourist projects for years, but with very little success. Permit approval is uncertain, expensive and takes far too long for investors to bother with; especially when less complicated alternatives for investment exist elsewhere. Belgium has not built a new 18 hole golf course for many years due to planning disputes, French officials have tried to close down several completed golf projects for planning irregularities over the past decade. German planning approvals can become little more than a game of chance depending on which political party is sitting in the town hall. This may explain why there are virtually no public golf courses in Europe's most populous country. The socio-economics of Swiss and Italian golf make them the most expensive golfing countries in Europe which puts golf



course permits at the bottom of most planning functionaries' in-trays. Countries like Hungary and Poland simply follow their fellow Europeans into the miasma of administrative inactivity. A single ray of sunshine comes from Sweden, where the golf federation, golfers, ecologists, NGO's and land planners seem to be able to behave like intelligent grown ups.

Over the past 25 years average planning application periods that I have been involved in have lengthened from one or two years to between four to ten. If we are to continue to produce exciting golf courses that meet with players' satisfaction as well as meeting our environmental obligations to society, radical changes in the minds of the planners is long overdue.

Strangely, the golf industry has never fully appreciated that anti-golf sentiment has focused almost exclusively on new developments and not towards established clubs. No concerted and meaningful efforts have been made to meet the often harsh, usually inaccurate and invariably hostile objections to new golf course developments. The golf industry has spent the past 15 years navel gazing, looking at existing golf courses, instead of addressing the real issues that the anti-golf lobby have been most concerned about. Collectively we have been shooting at the wrong target.

It is up to the golf industry as a whole and the sports governing bodies in particular to clarify the situation for planners. Helping the planning departments throughout Europe understand what a golf course development is and demonstrating effectively and intelligently how a well designed scheme can be of benefit to the environment and the local community must become the priority of all those involved in golf course creation. The recently developed R&A website www.bestcourseforgolf.org preaches only to the converted. It studiously avoids serious technical debate, statistical analysis or self-criticism. It fails to evaluate standards or develop concepts that could help bridge the gap that exists between the golf establishment and its more intelligent but uninformed critics.

Many members of the golf establishment wrongly consider the R&A Golf Course Committee, the Sports Turf Research Institute and the Scottish Wildlife Trust to be the organisations that can best represent the environmental voice of new golf developments. All these organisations are based in the north

of Britain, an area that surely has the fewest environmental problems relating to golf course developments anywhere in Europe. In addition the primary focus of these organisations is towards existing British golf courses, and they are generally ignorant of the wider European perspectives of new course development. Regardless of their environmental qualities, fewer and fewer new golf course developments will be approved until the golf industry manages once more to find serious and professional representation.

Together with EU legislators, national planners and their environmental NGO partners across Europe we need to define a common vocabulary, to establish understandable and comparative development criteria, to agree consensual planning objectives and consistent procedures, to develop design methodology and credible assessment techniques and to evolve acceptable conflict resolution systems.

If the European golf course industry wants to be taken seriously by the planners and environmental NGO's we need to be serious about ourselves and produce some respectable research work, independent case studies and a useful database of new developments built up over the long term from across the continent. To achieve results; adequate funding, technical and scientific input from experienced and qualified professionals along with meaningful co-operation from all the European stakeholders will be needed.

However you cut it, the future of European golf course development deserves a bit more than a general interest website and the goodwill and sincere efforts of amateur golfers and miscellaneous bandwagon riders based in northern Britain.

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Pern was a council member of the BIGCA (95-99), Vice president (1997-99) and a Council Member of the EIGCA (2003-4). A qualified agronomist with a MSc in protected landscape management he is uniquely placed to understand the constraints that need to be addressed.