

CHAPTER 64

CLOUD NINE OR FIELD OF DREAMS?

BOB LOHMANN

Lohmann Golf Designs, Inc. was founded in suburban Chicago in 1984 by Robert Lohmann, who served as president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects from 1998 to 1999. His company's services include construction management services and agronomic and environmental consultation. Some of his courses include Mattaponi Springs Golf Course in Virginia, and in Wisconsin, Bishops Bay Country Club in Madison, Whispering Springs Golf Club in Fond du Lac, and Cedar Creek Country Club in Onalaska. In Illinois, Lohmann designed Boulder Ridge Country Club at Lake in the Hills, The Merit Club in Libertyville, and Canyata in Marshall.

Heaven forbid the phone should ever stop ringing but, like most golf course architects, I have experienced my share of new course projects that never happened. In fact, if I had a dollar for every new design job that seemed like a sure thing but, for any number of reasons, never got built, I'd be a pretty rich man.

The story of Jim Oliff, for instance, really hits home with me. Jim's a lawyer who approached us a while back about designing a golf course on 320 acres he owned in Ruther Glen, Virginia, just north of Richmond. He approached my firm, and several others, in fact. He actually drove from Virginia to our offices, outside Chicago, to interview us. He apparently drove all over the U.S. interviewing architects before choosing us.

He turned out to be the most hands-on client you could ever imagine. The first time I traveled to Virginia to see the property, Jim picked me up at the airport himself. All the way from Baltimore, and back again the next day, we talked design and construction, routing, and wetlands permitting. From the way he talked, it was clear Jim was determined to build the course himself, with local crews, using equipment he planned to purchase.

Upon arrival in Ruther Glen, we immediately began walking the 320-acre property; at lunch he sent someone for sandwiches, which we ate in an old barn on site. Three hundred twenty acres is a lot of land, enough for twenty-seven to thirty-six holes, or eighteen and enough housing to pay for the whole venture. But Jim

made it clear that he wanted eighteen holes of golf and no housing. That evening, we had dinner at truck stop on the way to his home, where he kindly put me up.

I have to admit at the time I couldn't help but wonder if Jim Oliff really was a hands-on guy throwing himself totally into the golf development process, or whether he was some fly-by-nighter on a shoestring who would drop me back in Baltimore and never contact us again. It turned out Jim Oliff had his own way of doing things, and he made it all work.

He ended up buying all of the construction equipment we used to clear, grade, and irrigate the golf course. Even professional course builders lease most of their equipment, but not Jim. When we were finished, he sold that equipment. In fact, my construction division bought one of the bulldozers.

We provided shapers to build the features in Ruther Glen, where we more or less taught his local help how to build the golf course. This complicated matters for us but we made most of our site visits, especially when the greens were built. We ended up working very closely on greens construction with a local 'dozer operator who had learned a great deal from one of the shapers we brought on site. He was a real quick study, and he now works for us.

In short, the entire construction process was completely unorthodox. Jim spent a lot of time out of the country attending to other business. When he was on site, things moved right along. One day, Jim called me to say they needed a tee leveler. The next thing I knew, one of Jim's employees showed up at

our offices outside Chicago to pick it up! When Jim was gone, however, things tended to languish. Jim didn't seem to care, though. He was in no hurry to complete the project and we wondered if he ever would. The construction proceeded in this way, in fits and starts, for years.

Mattaponi Springs Golf Club did eventually get built. The grand opening took place in the fall of 2004, and it proved well worth the wait, earning all manner of national and regional "best new" awards;

it ranks among the top three public courses in the state of Virginia, and folks are still lining up to play it. It's some of our very best design work.

The experience working with Jim, for me, reinforced some important things—delegating is important!—but it also reminded me, and continues to remind me, why I got into this business: No matter how many deals fall through or never pan out, that next project could well be someone's field of dreams. And who wouldn't want to be part of that?

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