

San Fran sandbelt

Photo: Robert Kaufman

Inert fill has transformed the economics of course reconstruction and provided an Australian sandbelt feel for a California municipal. Adam Lawrence reports

Rees Jones, Steve Weisser and Greenway Golf collaborated on the renovation of the Corica Park South Course in Alameda, California

Around the world, plenty of golf courses would benefit from a substantial renovation, verging on a total rebuild. It's easy to identify courses that don't get the most out of the property on which they sit, or that miss opportunities in other ways.

The challenge for operators and developers does not lie in figuring out which courses could be improved; it lies in understanding which courses offer the possibility to pay back the investment required to renovate them, and how that payback might be achieved. Especially in the US, where multi-million dollar renovations are common, courses that have to wash their feet financially need a very careful analysis of where that payback might come from; it is very easy to renovate for reasons that are based in ego, but much harder to sign off on a project that actually stands a good chance of paying for itself.

Which is why the reconstruction of the South course at Chuck Corica Park in Alameda, California, by architect Rees Jones and his associate Steve Weisser, with the close collaboration of Marc Logan and George Kelley of contractor Greenway Golf, is so interesting.

Corica Park, a 45-hole public complex in the East Bay area is, as it happens, right next to the Oakland International Airport. The ground on which the complex sits is – or rather was – pretty flat and not possessing too many natural features: the nine-hole par three course has been rebuilt featuring some fairly dramatic mounding. And now, the South course has been rebuilt too.

Before we get to the actual design of the golf holes – which are for sure interesting in themselves – we must start at Corica Park with the construction story. Greenway, as

well as a contractor, is a management firm, and has operated the complex since 2012. The company has a 40-year lease on the facility, which might seem a lot, but gives Greenway's bosses the confidence they need to invest heavily in the golf course, knowing they have time to earn a good return.

The team of Jones and Weisser, along with Logan, solved both the course's drainage problem, and its lack of interesting contour

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in playing areas, by using a substantial amount – no one will confirm exactly how much, but one million cubic metres is a number that attracted some quiet nods – of inert fill to raise the golf course above the water table and to provide a chance to recontour the playing surfaces.

But that's not the whole story. Firstly, the course was paid a set fee per truckload to take the fill, which came from the excavation of a new tunnel for the San Francisco BART train system – which naturally transformed the economics of the build – and secondly, because of the nature of the soils through which the tunnel was being dug, a fair proportion of that fill was pure dune sand.

Logan and his crew ensured that the sand was kept entirely separate from the less desirable material, and it was eventually used to cap the entire course, with obvious consequent improvements in drainage. Sandcapping is a popular technique, but it is

typically very expensive. Never before have I come across a project that actually made money out of a sandcap! Because Corica Park has a suburban location, you can see the impact of this fill very easily at the edges of the property. Where the course abuts a roadway, there is a significant slope down from fairway to the road level.

The use of all that fill was in no sense the only unusual part of the South course

build. As is the way on high-end projects nowadays, the bunkers are all fully lined, but not with many of the proprietary liner products now on the markets. Instead, the team used artificial turf inside those bunkers, some of which came from the course's own driving range, but large quantities of which were brought in from the Oakland Raiders' American football training complex, which was at the time under refurbishment.

The new cart paths are set slightly below ground level to help collect runoff water – the course has a comprehensive water harvesting system, to ensure that none of the irrigation put on it goes to waste, essential in a high cost water environment like California – and have been constructed using recycled glass and AB base rock. Logan says: “This is the future of golf. It is the only way golf will survive, building courses that blend into the environment and use less resources.”



Left, the par-four fourth hole at the new Corica Park South Course and, below, the par-five sixth



He's right, of course, but that isn't the whole of the story. Because of the use of these materials, and critically the money received for disposing of all that fill, the Corica Park build has been a much lower net cost than any normal golf course construction of this kind. And that has obvious implications for the economic sustainability of the golf course.

Greenway is pushing the boat out to make it a high-end experience: brand-new state of the art golf carts (though the course will also be a fine walk), very high quality rental clubs, and a pro shop that is run by legendary golf outfitter John Ashworth's Linkssoul operation. And yet, for residents, green fees will be US\$40 during the week and US\$50 at weekends (non-residents will pay a higher fee that will vary according to demand).

So we have talked about how it was built: now to how it will play. Most of the holes occupy the same corridors as before, except that a couple have been reversed, and there is one all-new hole, a tiny and vexing par three at the far end of the property.

Talking on opening day to those who knew the old course, the difference they saw immediately was the relative lack of trees; quite a lot were either removed or died during the construction.

Partly, I dare say, influenced by Logan, a garrulous (is there any other sort?) Aussie, Jones and Weisser have adopted an Australian theme for the new course, and operators Greenway are pushing the Australian Sandbelt comparison pretty hard. And it is not without merits. Fairways are wide, greens are large, and the native areas, largely grassed with tall fescue, will be extremely attractive once they have grown in properly.

Jones said: "The sandcap means the ball will bounce and roll, and so you can play both in the air and along the ground. We had a very low site that didn't drain well, and we've elevated the fairways so it will be playable twelve months a year. The bunkers are dramatic, we have large greens, and a lot of them are low profile. It will play differently every day, depending on the wind, the season and the weather."

Of individual holes, I really liked the tiny par-three fifth I mentioned above. From the middle tees we played, it measures only 89 yards; there is no water or other lost ball hazard, just a couple of bunkers and ground contour. The green extends far enough behind a fronting bunker that the hole can be made easy or tough, depending where the pin is placed, and the green has enough contour to make feeding a ball across the surface a definite possibility.

The eighth is a very short par four. Drivable par fours are the flavour of the month, no doubt, but they are holes that are often too influenced by the pro game. If the back tees are 330, about right to make Rory and co think about whether or not to have a

go, the next ones up often end at 310 yards, and the regular everyday tee about 290. But golfers who should be playing those tees cannot dream of driving it 290 yards. The eighth is less than 300 yards from the back and only 211 from the middle, so the hole retains its risk-reward identity.

Eleven, by contrast, is a massive par three, 248 yards from the back and 185 from the middle.

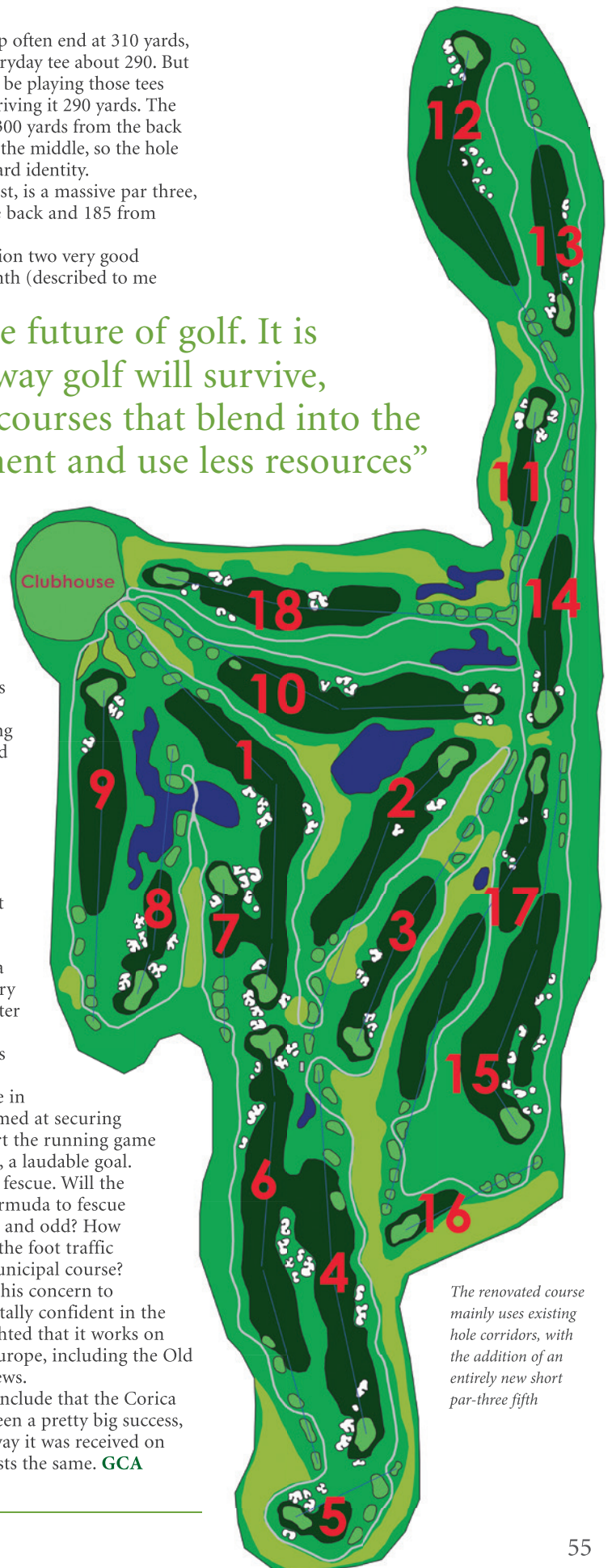
Let me also mention two very good par fives; the fifteenth (described to me

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by Weisser as Logan's favourite), short and very reachable, but with a huge and intimidating complex of bunkers set on the direct line between landing zone and green, and the seventeenth, much longer and with a nice rise in the ground about ninety yards short of the green – this hole is one that just begs for a running approach.

There is bermuda on the fairways, very sensible from a water use perspective, and this transitions to twenty-to-forty yards of fine fescue in the approaches, aimed at securing firmness to support the running game and the Aussie feel, a laudable goal. I worry about that fescue. Will the transition from bermuda to fescue not be rather stark and odd? How will it stand up to the foot traffic of a super-busy municipal course? However, I raised this concern to Logan, who was totally confident in the choice and highlighted that it works on many courses in Europe, including the Old Course at St Andrews.

I think we can conclude that the Corica Park rebuild has been a pretty big success, and certainly the way it was received on opening day suggests the same. **GCA**



The renovated course mainly uses existing hole corridors, with the addition of an entirely new short par-three fifth