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FAIRWAYS TO HEAVEN

BACKYARD GOLF COURSE OWNERS FIND THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME by Larry Olmsted

THE HAMPTONS II HOLLANDER
GOLF COURSE ON LONG ISLAND.
PHOTO FROM EDMUND
HOLLANDER DESIGN, P.C.



CLOSE YOUR EYES AND TRY TO IMAGINE GOLF HEAVEN. YOU DO NOT NEED A TEE TIME. THERE ARE no green fees. There is never a group in front of you when you are ready to hit. If you do not like your shot, just drop another ball. There is no hurry, because nobody is behind you. ■ This fantasy is becoming a reality for more and more individuals who own their own golf courses. From a bent grass putting green to a full-blown 18-hole layout, you can



PAUL SHEK TAKES A PUTT ON HIS PRIVATE COURSE AT HIS MEADVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA HOME. PHOTO BY BEN CAKES

build a little bit of golf heaven right here on earth, in your own backyard. Across the country, traditional home recreation facilities like tennis courts and swimming pools are giving way to tee boxes and greens ringed with bunkers. Gardeners who once tended flower beds are now trimming Bermuda grass, all so we can play more golf.

Reclusive real estate magnate Edward S. Gordon made headlines when he built his own nine-hole course on New York's Long Island. Casino owner Steve Wynn's Shadow Creek is not only a full-scale 18-hole layout, but the course, designed by the legendary Tom Fazio, is considered one of the best in the country. (See sidebar, page 367.) Montana's Dennis Washington, who made his millions in the mining industry, used the firm of Robert Trent Jones Jr. when he added a nine-hole course to his fishing lodge in British Columbia.

Once you've made the investment and had the work done, your biggest problem, as one New York businessman who owns his own course pointed out, is deciding whether to play at home or join the boys at the club.

While only a handful of individuals can afford the cost of a full-sized golf course, which the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA) estimates runs between \$1.6 million and \$4.5 million, almost every golf fanatic who has enough land can put a little bit of paradise on his property. Many individuals choose to put in one full-sized hole, usually a par 3 or 4, that they can play at their leisure. Others invest in just a green, along with some sand traps, so they can practice their short game by pitching to the green from different spots on their lawn. For those who want to play an entire round, but have

limited space and resources, multiple tee boxes can be used with each green. This way, three greens can be played from different directions to create nine distinct golfing experiences.

Most home golf course owners keep a low profile regarding their backyard investments—presumably because they don't want to broadcast what might seem like wretched excess or they simply don't want the rest of the world showing up to play on their private links—but the architects who delight in these projects are not as shy.

"It's a novelty, and a hell of a conversation piece," says Peter J. Fazio, Tom Fazio's cousin and owner of Fazio Golf Green Design in Langhorne, Pennsylvania. "I started looking at the home market about two years ago. I did a green with two bunkers, with a tee at 135 yards and another at 160, for a friend of mine who had about five acres. He was a scratch golfer who had gone up to about a seven and was trying to get back down."

Carter Morrish, a golf course designer who works with his father, the renowned Jay Morrish, recalls a project he did in 1992 in Malibu

for a man named Bill O'Connor. "He had about 17 acres, but only seven were useable," says Morrish. "He was building a house, and he had me put in four par-3 holes, each with two sets of tees, all on about two acres. It was a neat project."

Another designer, Edmund Hollander, has also left his imprint on backyard golf. "We have done everything from an individual hole, a green with sand traps around it and a tee, to another job where we put in four good-sized greens, with a pond, and eight tees, so there's a lot of back-and-forth play," says Hollander, a landscape architect who has designed several personal golf layouts of varying size in the New York metropolitan area.

Costs can range from tens of thousands of dollars for one hole, to millions for 18 holes, according to the owner's ambition. Creating fairways can mean moving earth, building contours, planning for irrigation and planting golf course grass, or you can simply cut the grass on your lawn short between tee and green. On par 3s, you can forgo



"THE HAMPTONS" PROPERTY ON LONG ISLAND, ABOVE. THE SOKOL RESIDENCE IN BRIDGEHAMPTON, N.Y., BELOW. PHOTOS FROM EDMUND HOLLANDER DESIGN, P.C.





THE GREEN INSTALLED IN 1991 ON THE SOUTH LAWN AT THE WHITE HOUSE WAS PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT EXAMPLES OF AT-HOME GOLF FACILITIES IN THE COUNTRY. PHOTO FROM U.S. INDOOR GOLF, INC.

the fairways altogether. Each green can have its own tee, or can be played from several directions. The one element where there isn't much room for skimping is the construction of the green.

"For a [United States Golf Association] spec green, you're looking at \$35,000 for 5,000 square feet," says Peter Fazio. "Most people don't need it. I can put in a green where you can hone your game and it would look aesthetically good for anywhere from \$9,000 to \$39,000. The bunkers and tees are not a big deal." USGA specifications are extremely detailed. They require substantial earth moving and layers of crushed stone that constitute a drainage system to move water away from the greens. Following these rigorous design and construction rules, which have been developed from decades of research and experience, will result in a true tour-style green, just like the pros play on. As golf architect Geoffrey S. Cornish wrote in his article "How To Build and Maintain A Putting Green," "When it has been properly designed and planted a golf green represents the final word in man's present knowledge of grass growing."

Because one of the design objectives behind the USGA procedures is the ability of a green to hold up under the traffic of hundreds of rounds per day, strict adherence to these construction rules may represent overkill. Regardless of how much you plan to practice your putting, few home greens will be subjected to that kind of abuse. Many home owners will be satisfied with a quality surface that falls short of USGA specifications.

"Most people are doing just greens, with a couple of bunkers and sand traps," says Hollander. "Fifteen thousand gets you a 1,500-square-foot green with a couple of sand traps. You can usually use the fill from the green for the bunkers. You can go with the real thing, or you can go with an imitation. You can never get synthetic to look like bent grass. On the other hand, you don't have to mow and maintain it."

Two main types of grass are used in putting green construction—bent grass and Bermuda—each of which comes in several varieties. Bent grass, which is usually considered the finest grass, is widely used throughout the northern half of the United States. In warmer climates, where the greens are used all through the year, hardy Bermuda grass is almost always used.

If building a golf course sounds expensive, it is nothing compared to the maintenance. The American Society of Golf Course Architects estimates that a full-sized course requires between \$300,000 and \$500,000 in maintenance costs annually, not including up-front equipment purchases of several hundred thousand dollars. Even the most modest backyard putting greens are costly to maintain, as they must be cut at least every other day, and sometimes every day, when in use. Regular lawn mowers will not do the trick, and specially designed models intended to cut grass as short as an eighth of an inch can cost \$15,000 to \$30,000.

"The maintenance is an enormous commitment," says Hollander, who estimates the upkeep for a green, traps and bunkers at \$5,000 a year. "You'll probably spend more in three years maintaining it than you will pay to build it."

Peter Fazio concurs: "There are variations from A to Z. Most owners have yard people, and you can just mow down your native grass short for fairways. You can go to whatever extent you want, but what you don't want to do is get caught up in the maintenance. Any home owner who is going to put this in is not going to want to maintain it. Anyone who builds this probably belongs to a club, so go to your superintendent and arrange to have him help you out. The big investment is the mower, and you'll need fertilizer and irrigation as well."

Many putting green owners avoid the expense of buying a mower by hiring either a golf course superintendent or, in some communities, a landscaping firm that owns the special mower. However, bringing in a mower from the outside exposes your greens to diseases, which are a common scourge of golf courses. Getting rid of the problem and restoring the grass can be more costly than buying the mower in the first place.

A low-maintenance alternative to real grass is a synthetic green. While synthetics do not have the cachet of a real green, they offer many of the benefits with fewer headaches, and the technology has evolved to the point where few golfers can tell the difference in terms of performance. "Since we introduced this technology, there's been a shift in focus," says Irving Bookspan, founder of San Francisco-based



COORS BEER PATRIARCH JOSEPH COORS' GREEN IN HEALDSBURG, CALIFORNIA, ABOVE. PHOTO FROM U.S INDOOR GOLF, INC.
 THE BENT CREEK GOLF COURSE IN LANCASTER, PENNSYLVANIA, BELOW. PHOTO FROM JAY MORRISH & ASSOCIATES, LTD.



Tour True Turf Technologies, a manufacturer of synthetic greens. “For a long time, people thought anything artificial was Astroturf. Now people are seeing that we have a surface that rolls true like bent grass.”

In the past 11 years, Bookspan’s company has installed hundreds of greens across the United States. One advantage of the synthetic is that you can install much smaller greens—as little as two hundred square feet—because they don’t require the same extensive drainage systems as natural greens; you can even put them indoors. With synthetics, as with real grass, you can adjust the speed of the green to suit your needs by adding or removing the top dressing that fills in around the blades of synthetic grass. While synthetic greens are low maintenance, and for many applications more flexible than real grass, they still come with a hefty price tag, running \$18 to \$35 per square foot.

“It’s not a cheap process,” says Bookspan. “Think about what you’re getting. It’s a putting green, like the one they have at your country club. Say you build a USGA-spec green that would cost you \$30,000. It’s

going to cost you 10 to 15 [thousand dollars] a year to maintain, so you pay for it again every two or three years. A Tour True green might cost 35 [thousand dollars] to install, but the maintenance is only going to run two to three hundred dollars a month.”

But how does it putt? “When you consider the people who are buying these greens, who could afford real grass, and know what real grass rolls like, there are no drawbacks,” claims Bookspan, who counts among his clients professional golfers Paul Azinger, John Huston and Larry Mize, as well as famed teaching pro Jim McLean. Golf club manufacturers such as Titleist, Callaway and Karsten use True Turf greens in their test facilities, as do several golf schools. Even golf fanatic and basketball superstar Michael Jordan has one at his house.

Paul Shok, an orthodontist from Meadville, Pennsylvania, swears by his synthetic green, which he installed five years ago and still uses three or four times a week. “I belong to a country club in my hometown, but I also belong to Firestone Country Club in Akron, Ohio. There’s a

tremendous discrepancy between the speed of the greens, so if I know I'm going to Firestone, I can make my green faster, and if I'm going to play here, I can make it slower. If I get on my green and give it half an hour or 45 minutes, it makes a significant difference when I'm out on the course."

Once you decide which green you want, the next step is figuring how big to make it. Your options depend on the size of your lot and the lay of the available land. Peter Fazio estimates that you need at least two and a half acres per hole, if you have a fairly square lot. An irregular piece of land may require substantially more. Hollander recommends three to four acres for a full-sized hole, and a minimum of 50 acres for a traditional nine-hole spread.

Riley Stottern, owner of Golf Greens of America, knows quite a bit about private golf courses. As superintendent for Wynn's Shadow Creek, he oversaw construction of the nation's premier personal golf project. Sensing a trend, he went out on his own. "We tried to do it on a mass-produced basis, installing USGA greens. There's a lot of golfers out there, and we thought that people could have a green, just like they have a tennis court, but you've got to have the land and the money." Stottern estimates that one par-3 hole will run about \$40,000 to construct.

To cut back on expense and space, you can use a green for more than one hole and build fewer holes than on a regular course. Recalling work he did in Wyoming, Stottern says, "People in the Jackson area who had 20 to 30 acres would put in a par 3, usually one green and a fairway. We would try to put in two auxiliary tees so you could play it three different ways. Go around three times and you've played nine holes."

These types of compromises are far more popular, and often more realistic, than installing a regulation course. While only a handful of individuals maintain true courses on their property, there are a

surprising number of "mini-courses," many designed by prominent architects. Robert Trent Jones II, one of the world's best-known golf course design firms, has done several projects for home owners, including the nine-hole course for Dennis Washington in Canada. Another project was done for Thomas Proulx, co-founder of computer software manufacturer Intuit. According to Steve Schroeder, vice president of operations at Jones, "The Proulx's have an extended practice hole with some greens that allow you to play all the different kinds of shots you would normally play."

Schroeder notes that one of the firm's most famous clients does not even own his own home. This was the case when Robert Trent Jones Jr. designed and installed a presidential putting green. "Bobby knows President Clinton, and Clinton's a big golf nut, and they were playing golf one day and Clinton was saying he couldn't ever get to practice his short game. That was the part of his game that was weak, and Bobby said, 'Well, you know there used to be a putting green at the White House.' It wasn't a big one, but it was there, and Clinton thought about it, and that's where the idea came from." Jones put in a new green on the site of the former one, and now the president can practice his putting in between meetings with heads of state.

Will the new green improve the president's short game? According to Shok, practicing at home makes a real difference, especially for someone with as hectic a schedule as Clinton's. "The most significant thing for me is those five-, six- and seven-footers," Shok says. "It's very convenient, and for those putts I have to make, it gives me a lot of confidence. You don't have to get in the car and go anywhere, and it's great when you get home from work and have 15 or 20 minutes before you have to take the kids here or there."

Using a famed architect like Jones, Morrish or Fazio will add both prestige and expense to your project. In normal circumstances, according to Schroeder, the firm's fee will be 10 percent of the



PGA TOUR PROFESSIONAL JOHN HUSTON'S GREEN IN SAND HARBOR, FLORIDA, USES SYNTHETIC GRASS. PHOTO FROM U.S. INDOOR GOLF, INC.

roughly \$250,000 it cost to design and build each hole. A nice nine-holer of your own will run \$2 million to \$2.5 million, before fees or maintenance.

Designing and building a golf course requires much more than a bit of landscaping experience. According to the ASGCA, whose membership reads like a who's who of golf, including Jack Nicklaus, Tom Fazio, Robert Trent Jones and Jones Jr., Pete Dye, Rees Jones, Arthur Hills and Jay Morrish, there are only 128 men and two women in North America who are, "by virtue of their knowledge of the game, training, experience and vision and inherent ability, qualified to design and prepare specifications for a course." Golf course design requires a working knowledge of several different disciplines, including landscape architecture, civil engineering, hydraulic engineering, agrostology (the science of turf culture and care) and construction using heavy equipment.

Of course, you do not need a member of the golf course architects society to design most backyard courses, and certainly not for just putting in a putting green. Hollander, who gets almost all of his golf work through word of mouth and referrals, is a landscape architect who frequently works on projects unrelated to golf. "If you are going to put in a residential golf course, it is part of your residence, and has to be approached like any other piece of landscaping. You don't want to put the green next to your kitchen window, so you look for a remote corner of the property, somewhere where it gets full sun and good drainage.

Just like building a house, you have to select a good designer, contractor and someone to maintain it. Any one of them can screw it up. We are responsible not only for design, but for getting it built."

If golf's popularity continues to soar, firms like Hollander's should be in luck. The ASGCA estimates that the number of golfers and rounds played could increase by 35 percent by the end of the decade. As more avid golfers are faced with more crowded courses, residential golf becomes an attractive option. Serious players know that the short game is by far the most important part of golf, so even just having a putting green to practice on can result in a substantial improvement in your play. According to David Bishop Sr., manager of information services for the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, "we get five to 10 requests a week" from people interested in installing backyard putting greens of some size and scope.

While one green or hole will suffice for many, some golfers crave a little more. One such enthusiast is Stephen Hannah, a journalist, who along with his friend, Bill Wernecke Jr., is writing a book on golf course architecture called *Six Who Changed the Course of Golf*.

"I bought a little farmstead in a place called Mequon, around 20 miles northwest of Milwaukee, with about 10 acres of land, and I decided that I'm going to put some golf holes in here," says Hannah. "So Bill, who has been studying golf course architecture since he was about 10, comes over, and we scope out the land, and at one point

I figured I could put in six holes, using three greens, so I'd be coming back and forth. The longest hole was going to be 190 yards.

"Then I read this article about pitch-and-putt courses of Ireland, and the longest hole they have on those courses is about 65 yards. They hit these terrific wedge shots that back up 25 feet on the green. So I started shifting my thinking and decided what I really ought to have is a nine-hole pitch-and-putt course. You can really do one or the other. You can have a regular hole where you are going to be hitting three and four irons, or you can really practice. I'd probably get a lot more practice and have more fun with the pitch-and-putt."

Hannah broke ground on his course this summer and plans to be playing in the spring. "I think I should have a golf course in my backyard as long as I have this nice little farm. I'm looking to do this to have fun, and because I'm 48 years old and I think I ought to be doing this kind of thing. I see myself out there with friends, with the sun going down, lofting up wedge shots while we drink some beers." Sounds like golf heaven. ❖

Larry Olmsted is a freelance writer who lives in Vermont.

MATTERS OF COURSE

For more information on building your own golf course, contact:

The American Society of Golf Course Architects
221 North LaSalle Street
Chicago, Illinois 60601
(312) 372-7090
www1.golfweb.com/library/arch/asgca/

For information on selecting an architect, construction methods, maintenance, costs and a membership list:

Golf Course Superintendents Association of America
1421 Research Park Drive
Lawrence, Kansas 66049-3859
(913) 841-2240
www.gcsaa.org

For information on construction, maintenance and environmental concerns:

United States Golf Association (USGA)
Golf House
P.O. Box 708
Far Hills, New Jersey 07931-0708
A Web site—www.USGA.org/green/coned—details the USGA green construction process and requirements.

Sources for design and construction of personal golf greens and courses:

Fazio Golf Green Design (Peter J. Fazio)
102 East Fairview Avenue
Langhorne, Pennsylvania 19047
(215) 752-PUTT

Golf Greens of America (Riley Stottern)
463 Heritage Drive
St. George, Utah 84770
(801) 634-0757

Edmund Hollander Design, P.C.
21 East Fourth Street
New York, New York 10003
(212) 473-0620

Robert Trent Jones II
705 Forest Avenue
Palo Alto, California 94301
(415) 326-3833

Jay Morrish & Associates (Carter Morrish)
3700 Forums Drive - Suite 207
Flower Mound, Texas 75028
(972) 539-3465

Tour True Turf Technologies (Irving Bookspan)
U.S. Indoor Golf
384 Oyster Point Boulevard - Suite 14
South San Francisco, California 94080
(415) 244-0690

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