



JEBB HARRIS, THE REGISTER

NOW'S THE TIME: Pelican Hill Golf Club general manager Hansjoerg Maissen, standing in front of some of the 125 renovated bunkers on his North and South courses, didn't let a poor economy delay the recently completed improvements.

Bunker mentality

At the base of the Pelican Hill Golf Club staircase that leads to the two 18-hole courses, workers are putting a fresh coat of white paint on the wall near where carts await to take golfers out to play.

The old paint is only slightly faded and could certainly last another year, but the philosophy of General Manager Hansjoerg Maissen is one of attention to detail, a byproduct of his years running world-class hotels.

That same philosophy has carried over to the golf courses, where more than \$1 million was spent recently to renovate all 125 bunkers. The project took more than two months to finish.

In any year it would be an ambitious task, but especially this year. As Orange County golf courses see decreased play because of a weak economy, Maissen and others struggle with the decision of whether to make capital improvements on courses or wait to do the work and risk alienating golfers.

For Maissen, the decision was pretty much made before he came to the course in October. Tom Fazio, who designed the North and South courses in 1991 and 1993, played host to a tournament there in 2001 and noticed the bunkers needed work.

"The course is more than 10 years old," Fazio said. "Courses are constantly growing. It was time."

That is what the Irvine Co. thought, so when Maissen was hired, he made it one of his first priorities.

The edges of the bunkers were refurbished, the sand was replaced with a combination of marble and sand, and some of the liners were replaced.

"They were great bunkers. We didn't have complaints in that sense, it's just that we wanted to bring it to another level," Maissen said. "What I want to do on the hospitality side — what I bring to the golf course — is to make sure the project looks in top shape."

The facility had the luxury of closing one course for a month while the work was being done, then opening it while the

O.C. courses grapple with whether to spend money on improvements or seek cover during a tough economic climate.

By JOHN REGER
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other course was closed for work.

That advantage, as well as a larger budget, is something many courses in the county do not have, and it affects administrators' decision-making process.

Mark Hoelsing, general manager of Black Gold Golf Club in Yorba Linda, is running a relatively new course. Black Gold opened in November 2001, and large projects are almost non-existent, but Hoelsing said he has faced the issue in previous jobs.

"If it is a safety issue, there is no discussion, you do it," Hoelsing said. "It is when you get into other areas, like aesthetics, that you talk about it more."

Scott Chaffin, general manager of Mile Square Golf Club in Fountain Valley, said the economy is certainly a factor.

"If someone is telling you that business is better right now than it was two years ago, I don't think they are telling you the truth," Chaffin said. "There are not more

golfers out there."

Fortunately for Chaffin, the Classic Course underwent improvements about two years ago, when the economy was stronger. The course replaced greens and bunkers at a cost of nearly \$1 million.

"We were obligated through our lease to do certain improvements," Chaffin said. "We would have probably done some things. I don't know if we would have done everything. It would have depended, I think, on how much cash flow we were producing."

Hoelsing said most courses set aside a fund that helps pay for improvements.

"Putting aside 2 percent of gross revenue is pretty normal," Hoelsing said. "A lot of management agreements require capital reserve funds. It won't stipulate what improvements need to be made, just that there is money there in case something needs to be done."

While Hoelsing's course is owned by the city of Yorba Linda, John Hendricks, director of golf at San Juan Hills Country Club, has new, private owners, but he said they are committed to improvements.

"They figure if the golf course is in really good condition, then the people will come here," Hendricks said. "Word of mouth will get around. Like, right now this golf course has never been in better shape. We are busy. Everybody calls up and says 'I hear you are in good shape. I want to play.'"

That is crucial, Hoelsing said.

"You still need to keep the course in good shape," Hoelsing said. "You can't afford to be known as going downhill."

Maissen isn't worried about that, but he does want to keep Pelican Hill a first-class resort course.

"The Irvine Company is a strong believer in keeping their product at top levels at all time," Maissen said. "This is a time that the company spends money. I always believe there is another level. I think I have this opportunity to put the icing on the cake. There is always more that can be done and should be done."

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