

Le Géant

A Giant Rises at Mont Tremblant

by Maurice Cutler

The operators of Quebec's spectacular Le Géant golf course are hoping to cash in on the trend away from private clubs to upscale public courses. The Laurentian mountain golf course, carved out of some of the oldest rocks in the world, has been operating at full capacity since it opened for play in June of 1995.

Le Géant is a striking, state-of-the-art example of the new style of green fee courses which match the amenities and "experience" of membership clubs.

The runaway success of Le Géant prompted the Tremblant Resort Corporation to build a second course, Le Diable which is scheduled to open in July of this year.

Robbie Hellstrom, the Director of Golf Operations and Maintenance for the Tremblant Resort says the 29,000 rounds registered in the past summer reflected a change in the way people are paying for their golf.

"It's a trend we've been seeing in the golf industry in the '90's: We've been getting a large number of golfers who either don't want to be a member at a private golf club or can't afford to, or don't want to make the commitment to be a private member.

"Those kind of people have generated an enormous amount of business for us. We're also seeing people who have played the local municipal golf courses and are generally satisfied. But they've never had the opportunity to play a bent-grass course with a high quality playing surface. They like to be able to say that they have played on a top quality golf course."

Le Géant was built at a cost of \$7.4 million by Intrawest, the Vancouver-based resort development company that bought the Mont Tremblant ski resort in 1991. It is part of a master plan that has also included the construction of a new Chateau Mont Tremblant, a Marriott Residence Inn and four large condominium developments, providing 1,100 rooms on the south side of the mountain. A European-style pedestrian village is another attraction.

Construction of the second course, Le Diable is part of the resort's \$500 million phase two development. The two golf courses, located some 120 kilometers north of Montreal, are the centerpiece of the summer experience at Tremblant.

Everything about Le Géant lives up to its name: 500 acres of property, many elevated tees, dramatic rock faces along the fairways and behind the greens, and

tee shots from multi-level decks into valley fairways. Most of the holes hug the lower slopes and offer impressive vistas of the world famous skiing mountain Mont Tremblant, the picturesque pedestrian village and the Riviere du Diable. Million dollar homes and more modest housing units-ultimately there will be 800-look down on the golf course.

There are video booths at the first and 10th tees to provide overviews of the course, advice on rules and etiquette and other information to help players.

Le Géant also has the new kind of management structure for golf courses rather than the more traditional general manager-pro-superintendent set-up.

Hellstrom, a university agronomy graduate with a second degree in business administration, wears all three hats.

"My role here is to operate the entire golf course product for Mont Tremblant and Intrawest and serve as a consultant to other Intrawest golf properties," Hellstrom told Golf Business. He spoke to us in his office, atop the course's maintenance building, about a mile from the first tee. "I also manage the tennis complex and the beach complex.

"The reason we did this was to ensure that we could respond rapidly to the needs of our guests. This avoids the situation that occurs when a guest is dissatisfied with the golf operation and goes to the manager, who then goes to the pro who then goes to the superintendent. When he can't find the superintendent, he goes to the assistant superintendent. It's hard to get accountability in that model and the customer's frustration is not good for business.

"With our structure, if we have a guest on the golf course who is unhappy about something, I can respond to that guest immediately, regardless of what aspect of our operation is involved."

Hellstrom said he believed that this kind of management structure will become the norm in resort type operations.

"Put simply, resorts are developing high level products that are competitive with private clubs," he said. Golfers are looking more carefully at how they spend their leisure dollars.

" Do they want to spend \$2,500 per year at a private club and play that course and play only one or two or three times elsewhere? Or do they want to travel around to a variety of high-quality resort courses and spend the same amount for perhaps the same number of rounds?

"With that desire to spend and that ability to spend," Hellstrom said, "comes an expectation of top quality product and services. To deliver that expectation, only

a centralized management structure that can respond rapidly to the needs and concerns of our guests is appropriate.

"It's a challenge. You go from looking at an agronomic problem on a green to trying to find out why the hot dog doesn't taste the way its supposed to and why there's a rip in a \$100 shirt in the pro shop.

"You have to wear a lot of hats, but it also gives you an unbelievable understanding of what guests expect. The guy who grows grass, knows he can grow grass and he knows he has to deliver a quality playing surface. But he doesn't necessarily know the guests or what the guests want. The guy in the pro shop understands the titanium bubble driver that he sells to players, but he may not understand the grass, or what the playing conditions of the golf course are going to be for that person buying that golf club.

"The thing that we have been able to develop, while working with a great team of people, is that we have all become more mindful of the overall operation. When I'm with my greens team, we talk about the challenges facing the pro shop and about food and beverage. We talk about the relationship of the two and how one complements the other. And when I meet with the pro shop staff I let them in on issues that are affecting the golf course so that they have a better ability to communicate with the guests, and a better ability to understand just what it is that we are delivering at the end of the day: the total package and not just their part of it."

Le Géant was launched when Intrawest bought the Mont Tremblant ski resort and adjoining property which included a nine-hole course. The new world class championship golf course was to be an integral part of the first half billion-dollar phase of the resort package.

"We didn't use any of the old course layout in the new design," Hellstrom said. "We just bulldozed the original nine holes." Three of the new holes are laid out on the site of the original course.

"When we went looking for an architect, it was important for us to find a Canadian architect because we wanted to show off some Canadian talent. We chose Tom McBroom who has done some great things with Deerhurst, Beacon Hall and a number of other courses. We gave him a spectacular 500 acres of land to work with and said 'go to it!' and what he managed to deliver speaks for itself."

Work began in early September 1993. The bulk of the construction was finished a little more than a year later in October 1994 and the course opened in late June of 1995, about 40 days ahead of schedule.

Excavation was a major obstacle for the builders. More than 27,000 cubic metres of rock and soil was blasted from the mountain. To provide a solid foundation for

the fairways, more than 210,000 cubic yards of sand was applied two feet deep over the entire length of the course. As if bent grass tees, fairways and greens were not enough, Hellstrom decided to use bluegrass for the rough.

To deal with a special growing problem, the builders decided to sod more than 50 acres of bluegrass. Hellstrom said this 45-day project was the second largest sodding project in the history of Canadian golf.

The course plays to more than 6,800 yards from the back tees, and slightly more than 5,100 yards from the front tees providing a challenge for players of all levels.

In its first year, Le Géant expected 10,000 players, Hellstrom said. In fact, 17,000 rounds were played and another 20,000 requests for tee times had to be turned down because of the heavy load of reservations.

By mid-1997, Hellstrom estimated that about 65 per cent of Le Géant players had been people staying at the resort. They were from a variety of places and include many who come up from Montreal and Ottawa for the weekend and stay at the resort.

Director of Golf Operations Robbie Hellstrom sat down with Golf Business to discuss the business of golf at Le Géant and in the Montreal region.

Golf Business Canada: *How do you view the golf business in this area?*

Hellstrom: We're in a unique position because if you look at the Montreal market, there are not a lot of high quality golf courses that are available to the public. There are a lot of great golf courses in Montreal and Ottawa (I put them in the same marketing area), but they are private. So we are trying to provide that kind of experience to the public, a "country club every day to every golfer."

Everybody says they do that, but we do it through such things as our guest services, through our overall quality and the kind of services that we offer: towels on all of the cars and cars equipped with windshields and pull down covers, asphalt cart paths from one end of the course to the other, and a variety of tee boxes for various skill levels.

GBC: *What is your general marketing strategy?*

Hellstrom: Obviously a very large part of our market remains Montreal and Ottawa. We have a substantial market out of Toronto which has always been a very strong ski market for us. When they come here in the winter, they see the development of the resort and they understand that the same quality of product that is available in the winter is now available in the summer as well.

This broad-based market will grow as the resort expands and grows and we've seen an enormous amount of growth over the past three years. With the substantial kind of investment Intrawest has made, obviously our targets are also international. We are going into the European and Asian markets, and we're talking to audiences in the United States, places such as Philadelphia, Boston, New York.

GBC: *What is your biggest challenge in today's golf market?*

Hellstrom: We've done very well so far. The biggest challenge in the Quebec market, as it is in the Ottawa market is the weather. For eight months we're at the mercy of either a bad winter or a great winter and that has devastating effects on golf courses. The window of opportunity for recovery and playability is so small that there's always an intense amount of pressure on everybody, especially when you're in a high level product area like we are, to get the playing conditions back into shape.

GBC: *What are the things that you feel have contributed to your success so far?*

Hellstrom: One of the things that we've really done right here at Tremblant is we've gone out and hired people who are competent in their fields. We have a full-time biologist working for us and our biologist is our liaison between us and the municipality and the provincial and federal environmental departments. We've come on very strong with the environmental protocols, and have an agreement in principle about practices and methods of work.

We chose architect McBroom and the general contractor Bruce S. Evans, the best golf course builder in the country. We took decisions such as sodding 50 acres of bluegrass rough. We looked at the topography and our growing schedule and decided that was what we had to do. This has created an unbelievably stable growing environment for our bent grass fairways greens and tees. Imagine the logistics of sodding your lawn and then think about sodding 50 acres!

GBC: *What are the problems you face in running a resort course?*

Hellstrom: A lot of people who come out are 25 to 30 handicappers or beginners and they may be playing with people who are 5 handicappers, or scratch players. They don't know the rules of golf, the etiquette of golf. We've got a really strong program to cope with that. We don't have marshals on the course; we have outside "guest service representatives", who will go out and speak to the guest about etiquette, rules and speed of play. But as in any resort we face the common challenge of the length of play. Generally we run to about five hours for the round and that's never to my satisfaction.

GBC: *Where do you see Le Géant three years from now?*

Hellstrom: We decided to go ahead with our second golf course because we quickly got to operating at capacity with Le Géant. It is scheduled to open in July of this year. It will be a vastly different golf course, a spectacular layout with deep waste bunkers, Arizona-style. It will be a par 71 which plays 7000 yards from the back tees. It will have five physical tee decks per hole. Twelve of the holes will be played in a pine plantation, towering over very wide fairways. Six holes will play in the mountain at a higher level than Géant so the views and vistas are going to be phenomenal.

In five years from now, as a result of our Phase II development, an additional \$500 million investment, the resort will have grown dramatically. Grey Rocks is now building another golf course. So that puts four golf courses in a very small area. It permits us to go and speak to a very much larger golfing audience. We can then say to them: "you're used to going down to Tempe Arizona, to Palm Desert or Myrtle Beach to Pinehurst. Now we have the ability to deliver to you four top quality golf courses. But not only the golf courses. We've got the lodging and amenities to go with it. We've got a world class resort at Tremblant that can challenge any resort in the world." This is not just a destination resort, it's now a destination area. There are great things to come.

GBC: *How do you manage to operate without a pro?*

Hellstrom: We didn't go out and hire a golf pro just so we could say we had a golf pro. We want a golf pro who is able to bring something fundamental to the experience of a guest. Our guests don't have to pay money to have a golf pro in the pro shop to say hello and sell golf balls. We've been doing a lot of planning towards developing a world class teaching facility, a golf academy similar to those in the southern U.S. like those of Arnold Palmer, Jim Flick and David Leadbetter. When we establish our golf academy, then we'll hire a world class pro to manage it. People will come and stay in the lodging, enjoy all the amenities of the resort, they'll be able to play golf and learn how to play golf on a world class facility. We hope to be able to work through that over the next few years and get it up and running.

We think there's a really strong learning market out there. Combined with that is the desire for families to travel together. What happens to the rest of the family when the father goes down to the golf school at Pinehurst? The Tremblant resort has a whole battery of other attractions that the son, daughter and wife can enjoy while the husband is out learning how to play golf at a world class learning facility.

obbie Hellstrom, 32, says he got into golf "by a fluke." After earning a bachelor's degree in agronomy, and a bachelor's degree in business administration he began working for a water park development company. Through this, he got to

know a man who owned a local golf course, Arundel Golf and Country Club. Former Montreal Canadiens star Dickie Moore asked him if he wanted to come and work in golf, because he was looking at the coming retirement of his superintendent. Hellstrom went to work as an assistant to Buster Cooke and he says he "learned more from him in two years than I learned in all the years I went to school. Two years later, he met a developer who came to play in a tournament at Arundel who was building a private community golf course between Morin Heights and St. Sauveur, the Balmoral, designed by Graham Cooke. Hellstrom ended up working for Development Golimont for several years before being hired by Intrawest to help them develop Le Géant.

Le Géant At a glance
Le Géant Golf Course
Course opened - late June, 1995

Size - 6,826 yards from back tees. Course sits on 500 acres of land.

Number of holes - Existing 18 Le Géant, another 18, Le Diable, opens in mid-1998.

Course designer - Le Géant-Thomas McBroom; Le Diable-Michael Hurdzan.

Market size - International destination. Local market (Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto) golfing population 1,500,000.

Type of Club - Resort Club. Also offers a membership program to its golf real estate owners.

Number of members - Membership program began in summer of 1997. About a dozen members in first six months.

Number of rounds played - 29,000 from mid-May to mid-October.

Revenue - Not available

Driving range - 250-yard practice facility with sand traps, target greens.

Pro shop - Located in the Intrawest Resort Club amenities building, featuring a full range of equipment and other golf merchandise.

Car fleet - 80 cars with pull-down bag covers and split windshields.

Tournaments - For those staying at the resort.

Green fees - Range from \$45 in the spring to \$100 in the summer.

Staff -

Food and Beverage: 10

Grounds: 18

Pro Shop: 15

Administration: 5

This will be doubled when *Le Diable* is in operation.