

IN SEARCH OF THE R100 ROUND...

Basic pay-and-play courses abound in Britain and the USA, but in South Africa golf is still largely reserved for the wealthy elite. **Richard Asher** finds out why, and whether this might change any time soon.

The Papwa Sewgolom golf course in Reservoir Hills, Durban, costs just R71 to play 18 holes on weekends and R56 during the week.

At this very moment, thousands of regular people are enjoying cheap, casual rounds of golf on no-frills municipal courses. They don't need handicaps, memberships or affiliations. Many didn't even need a booking. They rocked up, stood in line and paid the same minimal price as the guy in front.

With only a couple of exceptions, though, these lucky people are in the great blue yonder we call 'overseas'. Most of them are in the UK or the United States, where full-sized pay-and-play courses mean basic golf is a sport open to all. Sadly, it's a concept we're still struggling with in South Africa.

Yes, Britain and America have plenty of the exclusive, private, dazzlingly expensive, pull-up-your-long-socks golf clubs that provide stand-up comics with so much material. But for every Augusta National or Royal Lytham & St Annes, there's a council course down the road too. Somewhere regular folk can get a game in for a handful of dollars or pounds.

Richmond Park in London illustrates the point well. There's a manicured, posh club called Royal Mid-Surrey, where you'll pay upwards of £75 if you can get on at all. But just a couple of miles across the park stands Richmond Park Golf Course – 36 holes open to the public for a mere £21 on a week day. It's the same price for all; wave a membership card here and they'll only roll their eyes at you. Yes, there's a substantial difference in conditioning between the private and public layouts; you get what you pay for. But at least there's a choice.

Dare I suggest that in South African cities we don't have such a range of options? Yes, our land abounds in fantastic, lush, well-maintained courses, almost all of them boasting clubhouses with smart showers, swanky bar areas and maybe even a guy to clean your shoes for you.

Sure, that has its place. But we live in a country where far more people have far less disposable income than the UK or USA. Where is the no-frills R100-a-round option for them? Unless you're lucky

enough to live in rural places like Grahamstown or Groblersdal, you can pretty much forget about it.

The exception to that is in Durban, where there are not one, but two municipal golf courses charging under R100. Thanks to the local council, both Windsor Park (also known as Athlone Golf Club) and Papwa Sewgolum (or Durban Golf Club) courses offer cheap, no-nonsense golf to the people of Durban. Considering that Durban Country Club down the road needs to charge the non-affiliated visitor close on R600 for a game, how does a place like Windsor Park survive?

"The municipality pays me a management fee to keep the course to a standard satisfactory to the public," says manager Rajen Sewgolum (yes, he's the son of Papwa). "We get a flat rate to do the job and then greenfees go to the city. You might argue it's not profitable, but it's growing golf and providing a venue to the people of Durban."

"Golf has been the slowest major sport in terms of transformation, and the main reasons are lack of accessibility and exorbitant greenfees. Not many people in Durban can afford to play Country Club!"

It's no surprise that Durban's council courses are always busy – perhaps more interesting is the fact that their conditioning is perfectly acceptable.

Windsor Park won't be hosting any SA Opens, but it has tees, fairways and decent greens. How many South Africans really need to pay for more than that?

Huddle Park in Johannesburg provided a similar option for many years, and similarly this three-course property was always packed.

"You could rock up, pay your money, stand in the queue and then play your game," reminisces PGA chief executive Dennis Bruyns.

"Joburg misses Huddle Park terribly. You don't need to have all the bells and whistles to learn the game. People want to hit it, find it, and hit it again."

The decline of Huddle Park has been well-documented and the wrangling goes on. But the city

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– Dennis Bruyns

- 1 The mighty Umgeni River is a feature of the Windsor Park golf course, bringing birdlife to the course's edges.**
- 2 Municipal courses like the Papwa Sewgolum course may have rudimentary clubhouses and pro shops, but the food is affordable and the drinks are kept cold!**



hasn't forgotten about public golf, says Johannesburg city manager Mavela Dlamini: "The matter of Huddle Park is currently the subject of a new adjudication and therefore should not be placed in the public domain, but I can say that we're keen to retain a public course on site and develop a further two such courses elsewhere in the city."

Such a facility anywhere near Cape Town seems less likely, given that land is a tight commodity

around the peninsula. But the council does own the land for several of the city's golf clubs, and it certainly recognises the tourism value of golf as well as the need for development. Who knows what may happen when certain struggling Cape clubs' leases expire in 2016?

While councils will do what they will do, there's another question to ask. Is it possible for someone to start a no-frills golf

course privately, and survive while charging R100 per round? If pay-and-play works for the many mashie facilities in South Africa, is it that far-fetched that a par-72 golf course could be workable?

Disregarding the initial cost of the land and environmental concerns, the answer is a resounding yes. Consider top Cape Town clubs Stellenbosch and Westlake, both of which spend around R4 million a year on their courses – salaries

included. For our hypothetical new course we could easily save a million or more by compromising on maintenance – people won't expect flower beds, daily mowed fairways or entirely snake-free rough for R100 a round.

Let's be very generous and say that basic security and paying a man in a hut to take the greenfees takes the annual cost back up to R3.5 million once you're up and running. And let's say we get

50 000 rounds a year – a conservative guess for our low-cost, no-barriers facility. The greenfee to cover costs would be R70 per round! Makes you think how much our clubhouses and change-rooms are costing us, doesn't it?

Alright, so you've got to get some land and build the course, and you've got to make a profit, but might a good salesperson not persuade a council to do a deal on rates and water given that

- 3 The municipal version of tee times – you place your ball in the chute and when it gets to the front, take your ball and tee off.**

they're providing a public facility for sports development?

"I think it could actually work," says Johannesburg Country Club's director of golf Lyall Cooper.

"There's a huge need for something like that – in fact I wouldn't be playing golf today if it wasn't for Huddle Park. But you do get the feeling government would have to have something to do with it, because of the cost of land and building. Even if it made a loss, though, it's still providing a public service. And if you had a lot of sponsored development clinics and cheaper corporate days, you might even make some money."

So buying and building costs a lot, but let's also consider that it shouldn't come to that. South Africa has more than enough courses; it only needs some of the 'clubs' to reconsider their business model.

The idea of a full-sized 'golf course' that isn't a 'golf club' might be too much for some, but many a club manager will tell you that having 'membership' is far from being the optimum model for profitability, not to mention a headache.

But even though rounds are way down and countless golf clubs are struggling, will any of them be big enough to squash their egos and vote to turn their 'clubs' into 'courses'?

It would probably take something extreme to force such a move, but that may be what the industry faces. Course traffic is on the wane, and many clubs are being forced to recognise that maybe, just maybe, too many of them are pricing themselves for an uber-wealthy market that isn't so big any more.

There are signs that out-of-the-box thinking is already happening, and that's commendable. Look no further than Observatory Golf Club's weekday special: R59 for 18 holes in the middle of Johannesburg, including breakfast. Could the good times be here already? **CG**