



# WE'VE STILL GOT TO LIVE WITH THE ONGOING PROBLEM OF TOO MANY GOLF COURSES AND NOT ENOUGH GOLFERS

PETER HARRADINE. INTERNATIONAL GOLF COURSE DESIGNER

RENOWNED and outspoken international golf course designer, Peter Harradine, talks exclusively to Mike Gallemore about the problems facing golf in the Middle East.

**T**HE world recession isn't getting any better. The banks are continuing to hoard money and make loans available to all the wrong companies while pulling back on their sponsorship of sporting events, golf tournaments in particular.

The Middle East may not have suffered as much as some regions but we've still got to live with the ongoing problem of too many golf courses and not enough golfers. We all knew that once those golf courses under construction actually opened for play, the number of existing golfers wouldn't match the number of rounds required to make the golf clubs viable.

It wouldn't surprise me if some of the golf courses in the region had to close due to lack of members and visitors' green fees. I don't think another golf course will be built in the UAE in the next 10 years – unless it's a pay-and-play course. There just isn't the supply and demand to warrant it.

Ten years ago I was making the point to anyone who would listen that there was a crying need for a pay-and-play course instead of bigger, more luxurious golf courses but nothing

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happened. Today, there is an even greater demand for a pay-and-play course but still there are no plans afoot to build one. Golfers would flock to a pay-and-play course if it was a good layout and the green fees were good value. And why should we not build a course for ladies only? This will also fit in with the local culture.

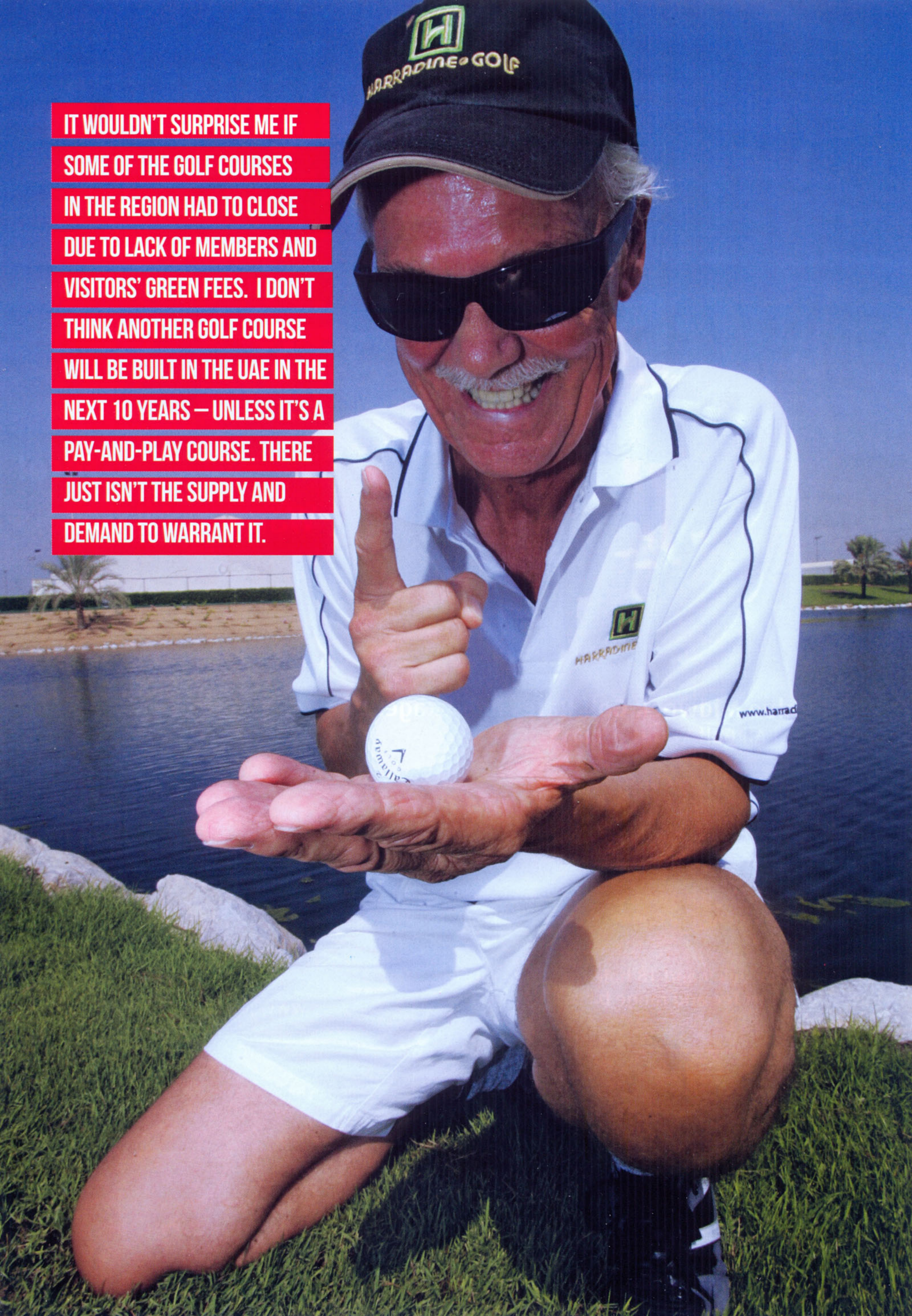
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"Why not take a leaf out of Spain and Portugal's book," they said. When those countries first became popular golf tourism destinations many years ago they fell into the trap of increasing their prices. Inevitably, the golf tourists went elsewhere – to Turkey, to France, to Morocco. Having realised their mistake a couple of years ago Spain and Portugal rectified it and now they're doing good business again offering affordable golf packages.

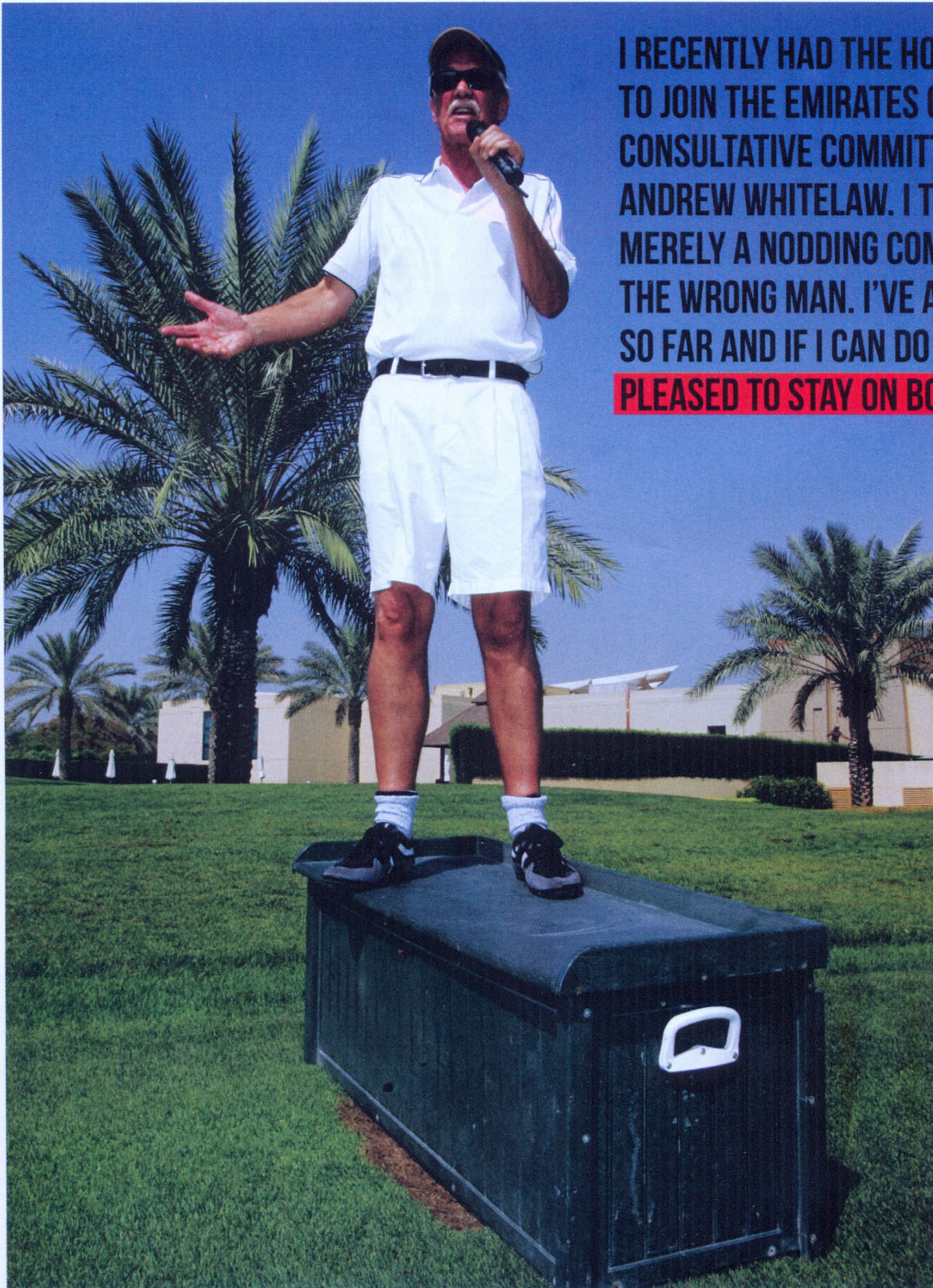
Look at the success of Worldwide Golf's Midweek Open series. Those tournaments give many occasional golfers, who were dropping out of the game due to the cost, the chance to



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**I RECENTLY HAD THE HONOUR OF BEING INVITED TO JOIN THE EMIRATES GOLF CLUB MEMBERS CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE BY CHRIS MAY AND ANDREW WHITELAW. I TOLD THEM THAT IF IT WAS MERELY A NODDING COMMITTEE, THEN THEY HAVE THE WRONG MAN. I'VE ATTENDED TWO MEETINGS SO FAR AND IF I CAN DO SOME GOOD I'LL BE PLEASED TO STAY ON BOARD.**

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play fun yet competitive golf at very reasonable prices. When money is tight people have to take the value-for-money option every time.

I do a lot of travelling in my job and I shake my head in despair when I'm at an airport watching people en route to places like Spain and Portugal and counting the number of them carrying golf bags. Flying back to Dubai it's rare to see anyone with a golf bag unless it's the pros coming over to play a golf tournament.

The situation in the Middle East has been made worse by the recession in Europe causing companies to reduce their personnel in the region, consequently cutting the number of

expats on the golf courses. Many of the expats who remain in the UAE are also having to work longer hours, thus reducing their leisure time to play golf.

The nationals don't number enough to make a significant difference to the golf clubs and more should be done to encourage nationals to play golf – so the only answer, as it has been all along, is to entice international golfers to the UAE with value-for-money packages. Dubai and the Emirates have a lot to offer the international tourist and if the airlines, hotels and golf clubs could combine their efforts into turning the UAE into a genuine golf tourism destination it would go a long way towards helping

the situation. Some golf courses in the UAE are pooling their resources to offer better membership packages to golfers and if that brings the prices down then that's a good thing. But right now there are just too many golf clubs chasing too few golf rounds.

I know how expensive it is to operate and maintain a golf course in a desert climate and that the cost is considerably higher than it is in places like Spain and Portugal but we've talked about making the UAE a golf tourism destination for 10 or 12 years or more – it's time to stop talking about it and start doing something about it.

■ I'VE been impressed with the new MENA Tour – it's a big advantage for the region. It's an excellent opportunity for the amateurs to play competitive golf at that level and it's good for the hopeful Tour pros looking to make their way in the game. There has been a fair percentage of international players from the UK, India, Pakistan, Morocco and just about everywhere, which is also good for the UAE.

■ I'M hoping that Meydan will soon open the 9-hole golf course I re-designed. The greens are in excellent condition and everything is coming together. Watch this space.

■ I recently had the honour of being invited to join the Emirates Golf Club Members Consultative Committee by Chris May and Andrew Whitelaw. I told them that if it was merely a nodding committee, then they have the wrong man. I've attended two meetings so far and if I can do some good I'll be pleased to stay on board.