

Sharp Park Golf Course: unraveling the hyperbole

By Paul Slavin *Pacifica Tribune guest Columnist San Jose Mercury News*

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Brent Plater, commenting on the website of his Wild Equity Institute, has responded to the dismissal of his federal lawsuit against Sharp Park in characteristic fashion: he says he won. (wildequity.org) And to support that claim he notes that the eighty-year-old public links course will now have the "burden" (in his words) of an additional 50 pages of regulations and restrictions mandated by the US Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS). The Wild Equity version of environmentalism considers a bureaucratic morass a victory.

In actuality, it really won't be that much of a burden, and it's hardly a morass. The majority of the terms of the "Incidental Take Statement" are measures that the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Dept. has long supported, such as clearing the connecting waterway from Laguna Salada to Horse Stable Pond. This was first recommended in a report by Swaim Biological some years ago as an effective way to move the growing frog population (and the snakes that eat them) to more spacious and hospitable land at Mori Point, south of the course. Mr. Plater's plan, however, had the frogs moving east from Laguna Salada, across the intervening fairways, and linking up with some distant cousins that lived up on Sweeney Ridge. When it was pointed out that the frogs (and the pursuing snakes) would have to cross Highway 1, Mr. Plater nonchalantly observed that someone would have to build a bridge for them.

Anyway, my point is that much of the restoration and habitat improvement required by the FWS is quite acceptable to Sharp Park. In fact, from the beginning of this controversy, San Francisco (which owns and operates the course) has shown a willingness to compromise, has sought a balance between the die-hard supporters of the course and the extremists that would close it down. Far from being onerous, as Mr. Plater implies, much of the new regulations fall in with plans already contemplated for future operations. The devil's in the details, of course, but most unbiased observers, whether judicial, legislative or civilian, have been impressed with San Francisco's desire to do the right thing.

But not Brent Plater. At numerous public hearings and online blogs he and his supporters have scornfully rejected every proposal put forth by Rec & Parks, denigrated every plan they've come up with to improve the environmental standards of the course. One has to wonder why. If the well-being of the threatened species is his overriding concern, why not work with the similarly concerned owners of the property to advance that outcome?

Because, as he has often noted, Mr. Plater's main objective in this long campaign is a change in ownership. He would sever Sharp Park from any local governmental control, be it San Francisco, San Mateo County, or Pacifica, and cede it to the GGNRA. The last remaining coast-side public golf course in the world designed by the legendary Alister MacKenzie would become a federal frog and snake sanctuary. He has long justified this course of action by maintaining that the frogs and snakes and golf cannot coexist, that course operations will inevitably, tragically, wipe out the protected species. He has claimed all along that the "science" was on his side, that the environmental vision espoused by his Wild Equity Institute was the only rational way to save the world, beginning with Sharp Park. Those who disagreed with his agenda were, at best, ignorant flat-earthers, at worst, self-serving hucksters.

But, as it turns out, the US Fish and Wildlife Service also disagrees with Mr. Plater, and it's pretty tough to question their credentials. The most important outcome of "Wild Equity Institute, et al, vs. City and County of San Francisco, et al", in my opinion, was the FWS's determination that golf at Sharp Park "is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the California red-legged frog or the San Francisco garter snake." This is a direct,

unambiguous repudiation of Mr. Plater's basic rationale for destroying the historic old course, an earthquake hitting his house-of-cards National Park fantasy, and a substantial challenge to his claims of scientific superiority.

Needless to say, this seminal pronouncement by the Fish and Wildlife Service was not mentioned in the Wild Equity victory statement.

The one thing I can agree with Mr. Plater about is that the final resolution of the Sharp Park dispute will be a political decision, and it will go through the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Mr. Plater has assiduously courted the more "progressive" members of the Board for some time, beginning with the unfortunate Ross Mirkarimi who introduced legislation in 2009 favored by Mr. Plater. Supervisor John Avalos sponsored similar unsuccessful legislation. Mr. Plater promises campaign support, guarantees a youthful phalanx of ecology students to flood a hearing room or a street demonstration, and assures all who will listen of the righteousness and popularity of his message. He paints a pretty picture.

But from what I see, many SF politicians and City officials (among many, many others) are growing weary of the hyperbole, and leery of the "facts" presented by Mr. Plater. He has an unfortunate tendency to, well, put his own spin on things, twist the facts a bit to fit his message of the moment. The examples are legion. Remember the "peer-reviewed, independent scientific study" he produced some years ago? Turns out it was bought and paid for by Wild Equity and the Center for Biological Diversity.

At the 80th Anniversary of Sharp Park last summer, Mr. Plater planned to disrupt the festivities by having his supporters bang bongo drums in the parking lot. I spent some time that day with Captain Joe Spanheimer and Chief Jim Tasa of the Pacifica PD, who were keeping an eye on things, and at no time were there more than 20 protesters at the scene. The tournament that day had about 250 golfers and an additional 100 guests for the party in the clubhouse, very few of whom were even aware that a demonstration (of sorts) was going on. However, the Wild Equity website on May 29, 2012, proclaimed, "Tailgaters for Endangered Species Outshine Golf Bailout Supporters", and replaying the incident on July 13 the website boasted, "Protesters occupying Sharp Park(ing lot) prevailed in numbers." Prevailed over what?

More recently, Mr. Plater encouraged SF Supervisor Christina Olague to sponsor a resolution that would have resulted in more bureaucratic entanglements for the golf course. Ms. Olague initially agreed, scheduled the resolution for a committee hearing, then had second thoughts and withdrew the bill. She gave no explanation, but I suspect that some information she received did not quite pan out.

I could go on for quite a while in this mode but let me conclude with a final example you might not have noticed. In the opening paragraph above I noted that Mr. Plater was claiming a victory because the permit issued by FWS to San Francisco "contains over 50 pages of terms and conditions that burden the golf course..." Actually, the 50 pages of the permit statement contain about 10 pages of terms and conditions; the rest is background material, history, etc. Doesn't sound quite as horrific, does it?

Our own City Council is well aware of the political nature of this campaign, and what's at stake. Mayor Len Stone has publicly stated his willingness to engage with officials in San Francisco and San Mateo County to insure the survival of the course.

And, if the need arose, I think the entire Council would unanimously adopt a resolution supporting Sharp Park. Mr. Plater has promised more legal challenges and legislative work for 2013, so now's not the time to let down our guard. Even after our resounding victory in Federal Court.

These opinions and the content of this column are those of Mr. Slavin and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Pacifica Tribune or its opinions.