

The Turnaround Artists

By: [Blaine Newnham](#)

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Sometimes it is as simple as cutting the rough. Usually it isn't.

"They've called us head-scratchers," said Steve Harker, the founder of Touchstone Golf, one of the up-and-coming - and successful - "turnaround artists" of the golf industry.

While a stagnant economy with dwindling discretionary spending has been the demise of many golf operations, it has proved an opportunity for Touchstone. The company was started six years ago by Harker, a veteran executive at American Golf, as a consulting source.

When the economy collapsed Touchstone moved in to operate courses suddenly owned by banks or otherwise-troubled owners, private and public. One of their first projects was Lake Chabot, the almost legendary old muni in Oakland that was once the home of "Champagne" Tony Lema, the late British Open champion.

Touchstone moved in, shutting down the course for four months to bring it back into decent shape. The clubhouse was spiffed up, the check-in procedure fine-tuned. It was a facelift without an accompanying increase in price. "Rounds went from 44,000 one year to 66,000 the next," said Mark Luthman, the company's chief operating officer. "The course had always been priced appropriately. Quite often, improvements are expensive. In this case they weren't."

Chabot was Touchstone's second makeover. The first was Painted Dunes, a municipal course outside El Paso, Texas.

The list - many on it because of bankruptcies - has grown to 22 courses across the country, from Hawaii to Alabama to Washington State, with the highest concentration in Texas and California. Harker and Luthman live in the San Francisco Bay Area while the corporate offices are in Austin, Texas.

"People have said it was a bad time for us to get in the golf-management business," said Luthman, "but in reality it wasn't. We are trying to meet a need."

In Washington, Touchstone took over management of a course near Seattle called White Horse, a course that in 2007 was named one of Golf Digest's best new courses but only two years later was languishing in bankruptcy. It fell into the hands of one bank and then another as the first bank also went bankrupt. In all, the course had five different owners during a six-month period.

"We don't usually get involved when things are going well," said Luthman, who opened Chambers Bay - the 2015 U.S. Open site - for KemperSports, his previous employer.

"That was exciting," Luthman said of the Chambers Bay project. "What I'm doing now is exciting, too."

At White Horse, Touchstone signed on with the current owner, the Suquamish Tribe. "They've been great to work with," said Luthman. "Speaking of sophisticated owners; they have a clear vision of what they want."



The Ninth Hole at White Horse

What they wanted was the 400 acres adjacent to the reservation plus an amenity for their nearby Clearwater Casino. What they got was a beautiful layout built mostly on sand, but one that proved much too difficult for the everyday customer.

Touchstone helped them hire architect John Harbottle to design changes and shaper Kip Kalbrenner to implement them. The modifications included minimal disruption to play and, with the use of sod instead of seed, were accomplished in weeks rather than months.

In all, more than 60 bunkers were removed and twice that many trees. The course is still a challenge as it could easily be a U.S. Open qualifier. For the most part, the missing bunkers didn't affect championship play anyway.

In some cases, Touchstone is in and out after just a few months. In other cases, like White Horse, it hopes to be involved for years. Improvements, said Luthman, generally come in the maintenance of the course and its playability as well as the performance of the staff.



The Closing Hole at White Horse

"We need to concentrate on the customer," said Luthman. "Are people having fun, are they getting value?"

At Chabot, Luthman said a big push was made to involve the community and to make the clubhouse a gathering place for more than just those playing golf. At White Horse, green fees became reality-based.

At Glen Annie in Santa Barbara, improvement was as basic as cutting back the rough and allowing carts to use more of the course. "People came to see us to tell us how much the condition of the course had improved," said Luthman, "when all we had done was cut down the rough. We were about improving the experience."

And, in some cases, saving golf.

Blaine Newnham has covered golf for 50 years. He still cherishes the memory of following Ben Hogan for 18 holes during the first round of the 1966 U.S. Open at the Olympic Club in San Francisco. He worked then for the Oakland Tribune, where he covered the Oakland Raiders during the first three seasons of head coach John Madden. Blaine moved on to Eugene, Ore., in 1971 as sports editor and columnist, covering the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. He covered five Olympics all together - Mexico City, Munich, Los Angeles, Seoul, and Athens - before retiring in early 2005 from the Seattle Times. He covered his first Masters in 1987 when Larry Mize chipped in to beat Greg Norman, and his last in 2005 when Tiger Woods chip dramatically teetered on the lip at No. 16 and rolled in. He saw Woods' four straight major wins in 2000 and 2001, and Payne Stewart's par putt to win the U.S. Open at Pinehurst. In 2005, Blaine received the Northwest Golf Media Association's Distinguished Service Award. He and his wife, Joanna, live in Indianola, Wash., where the Dungeness crabs outnumber the people.