

JUNE 14-20, 2002

Hunker down in the poolside bunker

It's official. Hurricane season is on again. It's the time of year when local citizens hope Mother Nature is in a benevolent mood.

Jorge Villa is a Miami-based civil engineer who remembers when she wasn't. That was 10 years ago this August, the day Hurricane Andrew blew through South Florida and threatened his family. He used that experience as the impetus for his invention of the Big Brother, a mobile bunker designed to withstand catastrophic natural disasters.

After founding Miami-based U.S. Bunkers nearly three years ago as a platform to market Big Brother, Villa and a staff of five have been busy marketing the patent-pending finished product.

"Right now we are trying to see about distributors and other marketing avenues," Villa said. "We've had talks with Home Depot and Costco," though no deals have been struck, he said.

The bunker seats six, has telephone and cable outlets, and contains a ventilation system capable of cooling the air within. The product can withstand weather and projectile impact equal to that of a standard military tank, Villa said.



Bank of America branches are interested in providing affordable financing for the bunker, which costs \$48,000, Villa said. Calls to Dudley Mathurey, small business banker at the Perrine office of Bank of America, were not returned.

The Big Brother resembles a lunar module for a reason: the lack of right angles allows the 13-15 ton structure to better withstand high winds and flying debris during hurricanes, as well as live ammunition and other weapons.

The bunker was first unveiled in February at an Association of the U.S. Army show in Fort Lauderdale. A patent search for similar products found them to "all have sharp corners with multiple concrete pours," said John Rizvi, patent attorney with Plantation-based Gold & Rizvi. "Mr. Villa is patenting the product and the single concrete pour method" that enhances the integrity of the product.

U.S. Bunkers faces little competition in its niche market. "There are other products out there, like steel rooms within houses, but nothing that is portable," Villa said. Portable, that is, if you have a crane handy.

- Chad Heiges

BRIEFCASE

by local courses, some of which have an average age in the low 80s, said Bobby Brown, Okeehelée CEO and founder. Doomsayers assert the courses will sit empty once the current crop of plaid-pants wearing senior citizens take that last electric cart ride to the great green beyond. But Brown said the grants are both a short-term boost to his program and long-term investment in the longevity of the game.

"Hopefully by inundating this area with young people, hopefully we can help those clubs who will need members," Brown said.

Brown's 5-year-old program gives full scholarships and half scholarships based on financial need. He said of the 2,000 children age 3 to 19 who attend classes or play in tournaments each year, 200, or 10 percent, are on a full scholarship of \$425, which includes a summer membership at the Okeehelée Golf Course.

Of Brown's \$23,000 grant, he said \$8,500 is for scholarships, \$2,150 will pay his seven instructors; \$8,500 is for golf equipment (especially for children attending the program under scholarship), and \$3,850 will partially fund a 16-week, winter lease to give children access to nine holes of the 27-hole public Okeehelée Golf Course from 11:30 a.m. until dark.

With the USGA grant, plus program fees, individual contributions, tournaments, corporate sponsorships and a \$11,475 grant awarded in November from the Professional Golfers' Association of America, Brown said he is only \$50,000 short of his \$234,000 budget for the year.

"If I don't make the budget, we have to cut programs," Brown said.

The effort doesn't mean some courses will continue to enjoy catering to older members.

Murray Green, membership chairman for the Eastpointe Country Club in Palm Beach Gardens, said he is pleased his 18-hole club has an average age of 70 to 71 years.

"Remember," he said, "we are a private membership club. Not just anybody can walk up and say, 'I want to play golf.' It is a social situation that includes a private dining room, private tennis facilities and so on. These are people who have reached a point where they can afford membership at a private club."

But if Brown has his way, more junior golfers across the nation will invigorate the financial future of the sport, while more mature players continue to enjoy playing through their golden years on the green.

- Robin Londner

