Golf growth prospects far from ‘bust’

You may have read or heard of the recent article in Forbes (Dec. 24) reporting on the National Golf Foundation’s Golf Summit. The feature story titled, “Extrapolation Madness,” questioned the NFG’s growth figures for participants and the real demand for golf facilities.

In some instances I agree that the NFG’s figures may be aggressive, but I disagree with the conclusion that the future growth of the industry is a bust! I responded to Forbes with the following letter: I’ll look forward to your comments.

Dear Sir:

Golf Course News associate editor Colin Blair responded to the National Golf Foundation’s predictions as “wishful thinking” — He’s right.

The NFG’s numbers may be wishful thinking — and I personally think that 350 new golf courses per year is preposterous. But remember, the NFG never projected that 350 new courses would be built. The projection is that 350 new courses will be needed to meet the demand.

The methods used to count golfers may not be valid. However, you should understand that there is a demand for new golf courses. The problems involving golf courses are not necessarily the causes, but rather the real estate development surrounding the courses. The demand for stand-alone courses, primarily in the public and municipal categories, is real. Just try to get a tee time at a Chicago municipal on a Saturday morning in July.

I have presented Golf Course News’ projections for new facilities on a number of occasions. Although more conservative than the NFG’s estimate (we’re projecting 150 new courses per year for the next five years, along with 200 renovations), this steady growth is far from a bust! Sincerely,

Charles E. von Brecht

Family affair leaves no widows, orphans

Everywhere you turn, the courts, the government, the schools, the voters — someone somewhere in the country is putting a child in the armor of the American family.

And now, just as the golf industry has resolved to be a part of the solution, not part of the problem with the environment, it should resolve to be part of the solution to the destruction of the family, not a part of the problem.

I don’t know exactly when the decline of American society began. I’ll bet the sociologists and psychologists argue about that. But you don’t have to be a “dologist” to figure out some of the causes of the problems. Too many children have been devastating to family life.

If you’re a job-ologist or school-ologist, Children and parents alike are faced with more pressures outside the family — either from jobs or school. More extracurricular activities keep more kids away from their families. When you break down a professional team practice nearly every day over Christmas vacation, including New Year’s Day, this suddenly becomes very real to you.

Jobs also are often more demanding and many send parents traveling much more today. Mobility itself, from airplanes to automobiles, has hurt family life.

If you’re a mother-ologist: Each year, more and more mothers are joining the workforce, either by choice or because of inflation eat up family earnings. The one person who has traditionally been home to hold the family together is often not there for the children.

Are there any solutions for this new golf course dilemma, a shortage that continues to grow near most large cities? A way to reduce the size and cost of building courses would make it easier to provide the joys of the game to more people.

We certainly don’t expect long hitters to start swinging easier or hitting 5-irons off every tee so that golf courses can be made shorter. Nor do golf course managers — the United States Golf Association and the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews — seem ready to throttle back on how far today’s “hot” golf balls can be hit.

A SOLUTION

Fortunately, a solution is already here and being used to accomplish these goals — playing a reduced distance ball on modified golf courses.

MacGregor Golf Co.’s “Mactec” ball goes about 60 percent of the distance of a golf ball when driven by a long hitter. It weighs approximately 43.5 grams, a little more than half of the 1.62-ounce (45.93 gram) golf ball.

A modified golf course can be set up several ways. What many golfers and developers think is what housing developer Andy Combs opened in 1967, at Eagle Landing near Charleston, S.C. This is essentially a miniaturization of a conventional golf course, at a scale to fit the modified ball.

A second option is a part-3 course that can be played as a modified course with a modified ball. This is the route taken by Charles Pasteur in building his Missing Links course near Milwaukee, and Joe Clark in remodeling the Highlands Links Colony par 3 course in Plymouth, N.H. An advantage ofoccasions is what the developers of the Britannia course in the Cayman Islands decided upon. There are alternative ways the course can be played, depending on whether tee markers and cups are placed. It can be arranged as an 18-hole Cayman course for the modified ball, an 18-hole executive course when played with a golf ball.
Continued from page 12 or a nine-hole course with a regulation golf ball.

At Britannia, use of golf balls has pretty much won out because golfers visiting the resort bring with them on their vacations their old orientation towards golf. After all, the game of golf does have at least a five-century head-start over modified golf.

To date, the types of courses have not generated enough rounds to support themselves from modified golf. Part of the trouble is that people who quickly adopt modified golf may be like asking older people to learn another language. Not many do unless forced by the circumstances. There is often peer pressure against a golfer trying something new and different. Comments from friends at the suggestion to try modified golf often follow the lines of: "What do we want to play goofy or whiffle-ball golf for? Ah, let's play real golf!"

The present modified courses have either not had the means or made the effort to effectively advertise and publicize modified golf. People who have never played or not yet become regular golfers are likely to comprise the bulk of the future modified golf market.

One fact revealed from the results of questionnaires from participants of modified golf tournaments is that women of all ages and a number of men older than 60 immediately find hitting a modified ball very satisfying. These are people who cannot drive a golf ball a great distance and can hit a modified ball almost as far.

WHAT'S NEEDED

What does a ModCourse require? Thirty-five acres for a 12-hole course. Another five acres is ample for a driving range, and this can be a pond, since these balls float. With another 15 acres ModCourse can be designed so that it can be converted into a nine-hole executive course. Five additional acres would be required to go from a driving range for modified balls to regulation balls. This backup approach gives a developer the option of converting or combining a ModCourse to play with golf balls. There would be an extra expense to this, mainly in preparing the extra area needed for expanding fairways and roughs, and lengthening some par 3 holes.

A ModGolf course could fit nicely as a second or third course, where space is too limited for another regular golf course and/or a mix of courses is desired to attract different types of players. Creating a ModCourse is also an option due to highway encroachment, for more land to develop housing, or other reasons to reduce the size of an existing big golf course.

Lighting a ModCourse for evening and night play can be considered because it is so small. If a ModCourse has a good location, is well designed, efficiently built and maintained and operated, promoted properly, and the fees are right for enough of the player market, a lot of people should eventually find happiness playing such a course.

Bill Amick, of Daytona Beach, Fla., has had his own golf course architectural firm for more than 30 years. He is a past president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects and is the founding president of the American Modified Golf Association, a non-profit group promoting the development of this new game.

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