Openings top 400 mark

Promising project pipeline makes '97 slowdown unlikely

By Hal Phillips

File this one under "Business cycle be damned."

The golf course industry witnessed the arrival of another 442 facilities during 1996, setting the stage for the recent slowdown in course construction. The impact on the industry, however, has been less than catastrophic, with the slowdown unlikely to continue.

Alternative spikes gain acceptance

By Mark Leslie

NORTH BARRINGTON, Ill.—In April 1994 when Wynstone Golf Club here banned metal-spiked golf shoes, superintendents nationwide held their breath, anticipating what reaction from golfers. Three years later, and 45 years after the United States Golf Association (USGA) first called on golfers to forsake their metal spikes for turf-friendly footwear, the revolution is on.

Ski managers: Golf key to year-round revenues

By Peter Blais

Skiing provides the monetary speed, but golf helps smooth out the financial bumps for American Skiing Co. (ASC), a major Northern New England ski operator that is fast becoming one of the region's major golf course owners and operators. Although it represents just 10 percent of ASC's total revenues, golf helps even out the company's cash flow throughout the year, according to ASC Chief Financial Officer Tom Richardson.

"Golf has been very important at Sugarloaf [USA]," noted Peter Webber, the Carrabassett Valley, Maine, resort's golf director and a member of the committee that coordinates ASC's four golf course operations. "The additional cash flow helps us through the summer. It lets us employ some of our best people on a year-round basis. It keeps the hotel rooms occupied and pulls in other summer business."

ASC operates eight ski areas — SunRiver and Sugarloaf/USA in Maine; Attitash Bear Peak in New Hampshire;...
mandating alternative spikes could jump dramatically this month. "This is when a lot of clubs vote on issues like this," he said.

And the driving force behind this trend? Not superintendents as much as the golfers themselves.

"I'd like to say the Green Section has the influence to accomplish this. But we tried in the '40s, saying spikes were terrible on the turf, and that did nothing," Snow said. "No, the impetus for going 'spikeless' is the golfers. It has nothing to do with research, or the USGA touting alternative spikes, or anything else."

He explained that golfers have become accustomed to faster, smoother putting services since Stimpmeter use became prominent in the mid-1970s, and spike marks "are more annoying to golfers than they were 20 years ago."

"The members are the ones most apt to be in favor of the soft spikes because of what they're seeing in the putting quality — particularly in the course of the day," said superintendent Bill Webster of Pumpkin Ridge Golf Course in Cornelius, Ore. "Play in the afternoon on a course with spikes isn't as good, while on a soft-spike course you're basically putting on the same quality as in the morning."

Meanwhile, more and more golf course superintendents' associations are mandating alternative spikes in their chapter competitions. And PGA members may follow the lead of the Michigan Section which voted 284-2 to require the use of plastic cleats in all its sponsored events this year.

When Wynstone pioneered the spikeless revolution, the membership made the choice and 10 or 12 people objected, according to superintendent Tommy Witt. "But a month later, no problem... It's working very, very well, even for the guys who swing hard. There is no issue as far as playability."

Webster, who in February was featured in a Nike film educating its sales force about spikeless shoes, said: "They've found if you're slipping in soft spikes you should be visiting your professional, because you're either swinging too hard or have poor balance."

Tell that to a number of people who, according to Snow, dropped their USGA membership because of the organization's support of alternative spikes.

Meanwhile, the feared well-spring of suits against plastic-spike golf courses has not mate-

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Irishman Brennan named PGA European Greenkeeper of the Year

DUBLIN, Ireland—The Toro/PGA European Tour Greenkeeper of the Year Award has been won by Irishman Fintan Brennan, who is deputy head greenkeeper at the new Bernhard Langer-designed PGA European Tour Course here at Portmarnock.

Brennan, who was a block-release student at Elmwood College in Cupar, Fife, clinched the title from seven other students at the National Final at Aldwark Manor, near York, home of the British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association.

The 32-year-old former metal fabricator won a 10-week trip this month to the United States where he will undertake a turf management course at the University of Massachusetts and visit the Toro Co.'s headquarters in Minneapolis, Riverside, Calif, and the Golf Course Superintendents of America Association Show in Las Vegas.

Joint runners-up and winners of a trip to the PGA European Tour Greenkeepers Conference in Penina, Portugal, last December, and the opportunity to work in the preparation of two venues of PGA European Tour events next season, were Noel Greene of Gay Hill Golf Club and Warwickshire College and John Bachelor of Mendip Spring Golf Club and Cammington College.

"I'm absolutely delighted and I hope that I can do the other seven finalists proud when I go to the States," said Brennan.

Alternative spikes

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and places like wet wooden bridges or slick surfaces. The convention steel spike can be equally as dangerous on the concrete surfaces... It's a question of relearning how to walk."

For its part, the PGA Tour's Tournament Players Clubs have adopted a wait-and-see attitude.

Director of Golf Course Maintenance Operations Cal Roth said: "We have not required alternative spikes on any of our courses. We're monitoring their use to see how they perform. Depending on their success, we'll make a determination at some point in time as to where we will go."

Discussion of the agronomic implications of plastic spikes versus metal spikes continues one-sided.

Although saying, "No question, there is a huge improvement" on putting surfaces with plastic spikes, the USGA's Snow said the association is "trying to be a little bit cautious about coming out and promoting them." Its closest move so far has been to announce that on courses serving as 1997 USGA championship qualifying sites, the association will enforce the banning of metal spikes if those facilities have non-spike policies.

"There's no question that the conventional healing time for turf under metal spikes is four to six weeks, but with soft spikes it's a matter of days," said Webster. "The reason is, you're not damaging parts of the plant that are required for recovering. Soft spikes cause more of a folar damage, while metal spikes get into the crown of the plant where cell division goes on and you destroy or damage the plants' ability to recover."

Webster pointed to a major difference between bentgrass and poa annua greens over a period of time. Since bentgrasses recover vegetatively and poa re-seeds itself, "there is a big difference on the bent greens, and the newer clubs are more apt to encourage soft spikes," he said.

"I just know there are no spike marks at the end of the day. Any agronomic benefits are gravy," said Witt. "It's (the ban) taken a very, very sour subject (spike marks)... and has eliminated that problem."