

A DRIVING RANGE CAN HELP INCREASE PARTICIPATION, ENHANCE GOLFER SATISFACTION AND GENERATE REVENUE

by ROB THOMAS

As golf facilities try to increase revenue in crowded and competitive markets, some are converting unused land into driving ranges, which can add dollars to the bottom line.

While revenue is immediately advantageous, the added benefit might be an increased customer base for years to come. Advanced golfers often are side-by-side with novice players, and even their children, because skill doesn't deter players from visiting the driving range.

Much has changed since the addition of a driving range at the nine-hole Sugar Creek Golf Course in Villa Park, Ill., according to general manager Dave Anderson.

"We noticed a whole different type of customer," he says. "People who don't necessarily play a lot of golf ... bring their families, their kids. They're new customers. It's another way of growing the business. It creates more enthusiasm and excitement. People come in to eat at the grill or have a beer at the bar. It's the extra stuff that adds on."

Sugar Creek – a joint venture between the Elmhurst Park District and Village of Villa Park, with a golf committee overseeing operations – took advantage of an abandoned school on neighboring land.

"There was an opportunity to purchase property adjacent to the golf course," Anderson says. "They took a look at it and decided to purchase it."

In the West, Incline Village on Lake Tahoe in Nevada recently opened a new driving range with pitched target greens – ranging from 75 to 200 yards – and sand bunkers. It makes great business sense to have a range, according to Jake Bader, head golf pro at Incline Village's 18-hole Championship Course.

"Every single facility needs a driving range," he says. "If there's no driving range, it takes away from the enjoyment."

If players are able to properly stretch out on the range, they can lessen the chance of

Business booster

The ability to warm up at a driving range before a round of golf provides the added benefit of golfers reducing the chance of injury.



The driving range at Jackson Hole Golf and Tennis Club has the added feature of the Grand Tetons serving as a backdrop.

injuring themselves. Economically, a range can generate profit. Of the golfers using the range at Incline Village, 70 percent are playing the course, according to Bader. He says the other 30 percent are stopping to hit a bucket of balls on their lunch break or just practicing. Many of them purchase golf gloves, tees, beverages, etc., at the range, which adds to the bottom line.

The Jackson Hole Golf and Tennis Club in Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming moved its driving range because of a renovation of 66 bunkers, 20 tee boxes and an irrigation system. A driving range is a necessity at the semiprivate 18-hole Jackson Hole course, according to Pat Donovan, vice president of club development at Vail Resorts.

"It's not an option to not have a driving range," he says. "Golfers expect to be able to warm up and practice. To not have that, we wouldn't be able to represent ourselves as a high-end course."

The range, with target greens and all-grass tees, is scheduled to open this summer. The new range is much the same as the old range, with one exception – added length, according to Donovan.

"We extended the range to accommodate today's technology," he says.

But adding length wasn't an option at Sugar Creek. Being a confined space – 300-feet wide and 600-feet deep – the land-locked site needed creative solutions. Contractors cleared the property, and golf course architect firm Martin Design Partnership of Batavia, Ill., provided a blueprint. Netting is tiered to reach a maximum height of 100 feet at the back of the range. The golf course sits behind the range and to one side. A residence is on the other side. Additionally, the range uses restricted-flight balls (10-percent shorter), which lose speed sooner than regulation balls.

The range has four target greens at 80, 100, 140 and 170 yards and features 30

divided hitting stations with 10 feet reserved for each section. Artificial turf mats are used in the stalls for daily play. There's a 20-yard area of grass in front of the mats used mainly for instruction.

"The length of the range is our concern," Anderson says.

There's also a practice bunker at the end of the tee line for golfers to work on their games from the sand.

Traffic, which has been good the first year according to Anderson, is enhanced by several instructional programs, including a program for junior golfers that has more than 350 participants. Sugar Creek also offers private instruction.

Promoting golf

Growing the game is also a priority for Todd Sickles, general manager at Diamond Mountain Golf Course in Susanville, Calif. Diamond Mountain, an 18-hole public course that formerly was a nine-hole course known as Emerson Golf Course, added a driving range and practice facility in addition to nine holes, cart paths and 100 trees.

"It promotes golf," Sickles says of the driving range. "We live in a community where we need to develop rounds of golf. If you look at Pebble Beach, they don't need a driving range because they've got rounds piled up."

The range at Diamond Mountain has 30 concrete hitting stations and 15 to 20 yards of grass tees with five target greens.

Like Anderson, Sickles implemented junior and adult programs to promote the game.

Budget concerns

With a tight budget, a considerable part of the planning process at Sugar Creek was keeping the cost at a minimum, according to Anderson. That was done by limiting labor costs. Sugar Creek uses a ball

washer/dispenser to eliminate a step in the operating process. Range customers can pay with an e-key – a magnetized prepay key that takes credits from an account. Seasonal memberships – good from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31, weather permitting – are available for \$350.

As for purchase programs available, customers can buy 10 small baskets of balls for \$35 and get a bonus basket, or purchase as many as 30 small baskets for \$105 and receive 12 bonus baskets.

Small (35 balls for \$3.50), medium (70 balls for \$7) and large (105 balls for \$10.50) baskets are available for purchase via tokens.

Over time, the range will pay for itself, Anderson says.

The grow-in of the range was done by hand. Anderson says the staff got lucky during construction because there was good weather in the fall of 2004. With the drought conditions of 2005, the Sugar Creek staff was forced to hand-water because there was no irrigation installed.

Most courses in the area where Sugar Creek is located don't have a driving range, according to Anderson. He says their initial research showed Sugar Creek was the first to have a range within a five-mile radius.

"Compared to other nine-hole facilities, there aren't many that offer the full amenities we have here," he says. "It makes us unique."

Whether the plan is to increase revenue, add participation or enhance golfer satisfaction, a driving range can help drive business. GCN



High-end courses like Jackson Hole Golf and Tennis Club are expected to have driving ranges available for golfers, according to Pat Donovan.

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