



## Adding value

CLUBS UPDATE PRACTICE FACILITIES TO BENEFIT MEMBERS AND REMAIN COMPETITIVE

by T.R. MASSEY



**T**rends in golf are changing with the times. Course owners and operators are locked in competitive races to lure players and members and to distinguish themselves from other facilities. Sometimes that means upgrading areas of their facilities.

Enter the driving range ... err ... make that the modern practice facility. Nowadays, the term "range" doesn't really do them justice. They're sophisticated uses of available land, and facilities need to make the most of them.

In cold-weather climates, where the season can be six months long at most, heated stations or indoor buildings with open bay doors are springing up. Clubs that expand practice areas are building bunkers and practice fairways that allow players to hit shots they'll face on the golf course.

### Keeping an edge

One can look no further than one of the North's most well-known, old-school private clubs as an example. When the 2004 Ryder Cup ended at Oakland Hills Country Club in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., the members of the private 36-hole club remodeled its antiquated driving range into a modern practice facility.

Oakland Hills has a history of hosting major championships, and the PGA Championship will be played there in 2008. With a high-caliber course and clubhouse, it offers one of the area's most alluring private-club memberships, but the practice area was always the club's least highlighted attraction.

"As you look across the landscape of our facility, the practice area was a step down from the rest," says Rick Bayliss, the club's chief operating officer. "We are first and foremost a golf club, so upgrading the facility plays to the demographics of our members. The practice portion is a great part of the recreational

enjoyment. As busy as everyone is, enjoying 45 minutes on the practice range is a big part of what they join for. We wanted to improve our practice facility dramatically. Before, it wasn't that good. Now, it's a jewel, and our members really appreciate it."

Oakland Hills contracted the architectural firm Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest and Associates to improve the practice area. A short-game practice area was added, and the size of the teeing space in the existing facility was tripled from 1,800 square feet to 6,000 square feet.

"We moved the swimming pool, went into existing property, regraded and put in target greens and bunkers," Bayliss says. "The short-game area moved to a quiet place on the property, and it's a real jewel because of its practical benefit."

The practice facility was built in an area between the clubhouse and the old practice range, so it's useful and easy to access. Also, the short-game area allows members to replicate shots needed on both of the hilly courses.

"We designed it for 60- to 70-yard bunker shots," Bayliss says. "We built two enormous greens. You can hit shots from the rough – all kinds of things."

The club also installed a new indoor teaching facility, complete with cameras, computers and areas for club fitting.

"It's a huge benefit for the membership," Bayliss says.

Even though Oakland Hills is known throughout the country, that doesn't mean members simply join because of its name.

"The new practice facility further distinguished us in our market as well," Bayliss says. "The market in metro-Detroit is very competitive. Many clubs are struggling and competing for the same membership base. Distinguishing yourself further at every opportunity is important. When it comes time to focus on membership service and recreation

service, we want to make sure we don't have an Achilles' Heel."

Bayliss also says Michigan has more public golf courses per capita than any other state in America.

"So our members have options to play in resort areas," he says. "We try not to rest on our laurels."

The short-game area of Oakland Hills' practice facility was part of an overall \$4.5 million project that included upgrades to the swimming facility as well as the tennis and platform areas. The driving range tee expansion and short-game construction cost about \$1.3 million.

"Our operational model provides funds on an annual basis to improve the facility, so there was no assessment to our membership," Bayliss says. "It certainly has given our membership the most benefit. In this climate, you have swimming and tennis only for about 90 days."

Bayliss says it's difficult to measure the return on the investment in terms of direct dollars.

"But from membership satisfaction and a competitive standpoint, we're doing great," he says. "We had a full membership roster and still do. But our membership satisfaction is quite high because we've measured it."

The club is fully staffed with professionals, so it didn't need to hire a new employee as a result of the practice-facility renovation. And the staff is teaching more lessons than ever, Bayliss says.

Unlike staffing, maintenance has been impacted more as a result of the renovation.

"The triple-row irrigation in the practice fairways resulted in a moderate increase in cost, but it's an incremental cost and not prohibitive by any stretch of the imagination," Bayliss says.

### Copying the course

Across the country in Arizona, the 11-



Lancaster Country Club suffered from a lack of practice space, so it expanded its practice facility, which is a selling point. Photo: Lancaster Country Club

year-old, Tom Fazio-designed Estancia Club felt the need to improve its practice area to keep up with the current trend. General manager Keith Underwood says members at the private facility often hold other memberships throughout the world and expect the best when it comes to every phase of the club's operation.

"We have to remain competitive with other clubs and increase our distinction in the market," he says.

Also, when the club was built, the practice range wasn't designed to allow players to replicate shots they'd see on the course. The new area will do just that, and it's part of a course overhaul that includes a bunker redesign and greens renovation under the watchful eye of Fazio.

"We had the capital to do this," says Underwood, who declined to disclose the price of the project. "It didn't come out of an assessment, but came from capital funds. It was money well spent to continually improve services to our members and remain one of the preeminent clubs in Arizona."

The fully staffed club needed no new golf professionals to work on the range.

Estancia's director of agronomy Mike Mongiello, CGCS, realizes practice areas are an important part of modern golf.

"Back when, it was called a driving range, and you didn't pay a great deal of attention to it," he says. "Now it's more popular and sophisticated. It's not a driving range anymore, it's a practice facility."

Mongiello says the membership was chomping at the bit to use the new practice area, which was completed in early November.

"I'm a fan," Mongiello says. "It's a redesign by Tom Fazio's design team, and they took everything into consideration."

Because the club will start remodeling bunkers this year, Mongiello and the Fazio staff used the short-game-area bunkers as models for what they will build on the course.

"We can show the members different sands to choose from," Mongiello says. "It's a great place to wiggle your feet and nestle down and chunk as many balls as you want."

In that same mode, Estancia built the chipping greens to mirror on-course models.

"They're the same as they are on the course, so they can see how a ball reacts on the course," Mongiello says. "It's as exact as we can make it to playing conditions on our golf course."

The transformation of the short-game area is remarkable, Mongiello says.

"We took an existing area and expanded it and built a mound between the driving tees and the short-game area," he says. "We built a new green and three bunkers and a regular tee for that area that gives them anywhere from 40 yards out to bump-and-runs. We contoured around the green so they'd have uphill and downhill lies, flat lies and bump-and-runs. We took every shot on the golf course and duplicated it in this area. There's not a shot on the course that we don't have. We built a bunker on the desert edge of the course that's fairly flat where they can hit a 280-yard shot out of a sand bunker."



Estancia Club's members expect the best when it comes to every phase of the club's operations, including the practice facility. Photo: Estancia Club

And there's maintenance to consider in the new practice area.

"There's always maintenance to everything if it's done properly," Mongiello says. "In the short-game area, there won't be huge divots like there will be on the tee. Of course, there's maintenance when you add turf or sand or greens. There's a dollar figure attached to it, but we can handle it."

### A selling point

Clubs without national reputations are jumping on the practice-area bandwagon as well. At Lancaster Country Club in central Ohio, general manager Steve Ververis and director of golf operations Ed Grooms say the club's practice facility was outdated. A new one was built

in 2001 and opened in 2002, using land the private club owned but never used before.

Ververis says the almost 100-year-old, 18-hole private club (nine holes of which were designed by Donald Ross), suffered from a lack of practice space.

"Until 10 or 20 years ago, no one of our generation had a practice facility," Ververis says. "In the climate of the private-club sector, a practice facility is a drawing point. We had to retrofit the club with a good range as an additional selling point. What we had before wasn't cutting it. Before, our range was for a quick warm-up. Now the facility is a destination. Guys come out and practice for an hour."

The new teeing ground is more than

100 yards wide and 275 yards deep, uphill. It has four target greens, a practice pitching green and area, greenside bunkers and a fairway bunker.

"So you can hit just about any shot you'd have on the course," Grooms says.

The members were assessed for the improvement.

"We lost a few members because of it, but that's been offset by new members," Ververis says. "Many new members love the idea of having a facility to practice. It's worked out pretty well. We don't charge for the use of it, it's built into the dues. Membership satisfaction is way up."

Grooms now has a teaching spot on the opposite end of the range with electricity



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"So our ability to teach has been enhanced," he says. "My lessons have increased considerably. Each year, I give more lessons."

The club kept the older, smaller range for clinics and junior outings.

"We're fortunate to have two ranges," Grooms says.

### On pace with the Joneses

Like Lancaster, Naperville Country Club is an old-school course in Illinois that opened in 1921. Years later, architect Tom Bendelow remodeled the course but didn't pay much attention to the range, which by today's standards was much too short and narrow. Often, wayward shots flew into the adjacent maintenance area or onto neighboring fairways.

"We wanted to make it a better, safer, bigger and longer practice area," says head golf professional Jim Arendt. "We eliminated one of the holes that ran parallel to the driving range. The fact that we made it longer is an additional bonus. The maintenance facility was at the end of the range, and that's moving so we can use regular range balls."

The club also is rerouting many of the other holes on the course, all of which has been done by Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest and Associates. In the practice area, new target greens and a larger teeing area were constructed.

"We have a lot of people who get off the train in the evening, and they want to hit balls for an hour or decompress," Arendt says. "People get together and talk and set up their games for the weekend."

Naperville doesn't have swimming or tennis, so the members are strictly about golf.

"They have a much better facility than they did previously," Arendt says. "The reason we embarked on the project was to update our facilities and to attract golfers in general."

In the area surrounding the club, there are three newer private clubs connected to housing developments. The upgrades to the course and practice area let Naperville compete at a higher level.

"Many good players would come out here and say, 'It's cute, but it's the kind of course where you can't see your ball land.' The redesign makes it completely different. We're hoping to attract good golfers and more of the regular golfers as well. You're moving to make progress or you're falling behind. You have to keep

up with the Joneses."

Steve Forrest, the lead architect on the project, says it's one of the most rewarding projects of his career.

"The course will be so much better," he says. "And if you have a good imagination, you could play the course on the practice tee."

Forrest says the idea of replicating shots on a driving range derived from those on a course first occurred in 1996 at a course they designed at The Lakes of Taylor in Michigan. They've been doing it ever since.

"The practice range is much more visually appealing and fun," he says. "People will use the range, particularly the short-game areas. You don't just have to stand out there blasting balls with drivers all day. You need to learn to hit shots from 100 yards in." GCN

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Naperville Country Club renovated its practice facility because it was too short and narrow. The club is hoping to attract golfers as a result. Photo: Naperville Country Club

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