

Golf cars are latecomers to nation's busiest facility



The clubhouse at Bethpage State Park was opened in 1935, the same year as the first three courses.

A conspicuous holdout against the use of golf cars didn't think it needed to do anything beyond what it was already doing so well — providing about twice as many rounds of golf as any other course complex in the United States. But state budget tightening, poor economic conditions, and aging patrons changed management's mind. Although 300,000 rounds of golf a year does not sound like a facility where patronage is falling off, that is just what had been happening at the world's biggest public golf course complex: Bethpage State Park on New York's Long Island.

The five Bethpage courses draw 1,400 to 1,700 rounds a day and have seen as many as 2,100. Many players, loyal since the early days of the park in the 1930's, were drifting away, however. They were getting along in years and the courses, which had no golf cars, were proving strenuous.

Bethpage held back from putting in golf cars until recent years because it



Golf cars are charged in Bethpage's storage shed, which can hold 150 cars.



Bethpage's golf cars are moved from storage shed to pickup station in trains of six. Front car easily pulls the train.

didn't feel the demand was there. Additionally, it felt that the course was too hilly, with elevation variations of up to 100 feet, for electric cars to make sufficient rounds on a night's charging.

"Now we have golf cars," says Eric Siebert, superintendent of the park, "and the players are coming back. Also, we have a new source of revenue."

Outside help

State funds were not available to fund a golf car installation, so the solution was a concession arrangement with Fairway Golf Car Co. of Medford, L.I., which made the necessary \$300,000 capital investment. Aside from the cars themselves, this included a building to store the cars, recharging equipment, underground electric lines to bring in the current for charging, and a system of paths. The state will receive a percentage of the gross income from the golf car operation for 5 years. At the end of the 5 years, the state will own all of the structures built (but not the cars) and a new fi-

nancial arrangement will be made at that time.

Fairway now has golf cars on two of the five Bethpage courses and hopes to extend its franchise to the other three soon. The concession started with 100 Johns-Manville Club Cars and expects to do over 200 rounds on

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each car during the golf season.

"During some summer weekends, the cars have done as many as 54 holes — three full 18-hole rounds — in a day. This is due to the fact that these are the lightest golf cars built today," says Irwin Frick, partner in Fairway.

Long yardage and short charges

The golf car's ability to handle multiple rounds of golf is enhanced by its

need for less battery charging time. Ideally, a golf car should have 11 hours of charging each night. At Bethpage, available charging time is short. In midsummer, cars are out at 5:30 a.m. and don't finish their day until 8:30 at night, giving only 9 hours in the charging shed. Club Cars have been able to sustain this schedule without difficulty.

the shed, 160 feet long and 32 feet wide, was built to hold 150 cars. By hooking them together in trains of six, one attendant driving the lead car is able to move the cars to the point near the first tee where golfers pick them up, and get them there fast enough to satisfy the high demand. The trains are longer than Frick had originally thought possible, but they are working well without draining the car doing the pulling.

Of the 1,475 acres of Bethpage State Park, about 900 are devoted to golf courses. The first three — the Red, the Blue and the Green — were opened in 1935. Lenox Hill, a private club built in 1921 and later turned over to the state as part of the Bethpage package, formed 16 of the 18 holes of the Green course. In 1936, the fourth course, the challenging Black, was opened. The final course, the Yellow, was added in 1958. A large clubhouse with pro shop, restaurant, and locker room facilities was completed in 1935.

Fairway began building the Bethpage golf car facilities in April 1976 and now has cars running on the Blue and Yellow courses. Adding cars to the Red course, the next in line to be motorized, will bring Fairway's golf car fleet requirement at Bethpage up to 150.

Even when patronage seemed to be slowing, Bethpage's golfers continued to play in the snow and rain, and on summer weekends began lining up Friday night for Saturday morning tee times. Fortunately, getting more foursomes around the course faster is now possible with Bethpage's golf cars. □