

# Winter moneymaker for golf courses: cross-country skiing

by Ron Beltz

Cross-country skiing has become North America's fastest growing sport over the last few years. Hordes of skiers now set out to brave the winds of winter every weekend instead of quietly sitting in front of a television screen. All indications show that the craze has not yet reached its peak, and with increased participation comes the inevitable problem of inadequate facilities. Where can the skier find scenic routes and well-prepared trails as well as rental equipment and refreshments? Many golf course managers have found that with a little planning and a modest investment, they can adapt their operations to serve the skier as well as they meet the needs of golfers.

The needs of the skier are simple. All he demands is a packed trail which is well-marked, and he is in business. While he prefers a trail which is "set" with parallel ruts 6 inches apart, heavy skiing will accomplish this for him. A trail system should cover at least 4 miles, although some areas offer less. Although instruction will increase his enjoyment, many skiers have a lot of fun their first time out and keep coming back for more. It is a sport one learns by doing, and a few tips about the general principles of gliding rather than walking and techniques for getting up hills are as much as many good skiers have ever had.

Since many golf courses don't offer particularly rugged terrain, they are ideally suited to novices and youngsters, for it is truly a sport the whole family can enjoy. Often a child will begin skiing at the age of 6 or 7 — far younger than most people take up golf. Since the stamina of a family group varies, skiers appreciate an area where they can rest and obtain refreshments. As in golf season, this is an important revenue source for the operator. Skiers get hungrier and

*Of himself, Ron Beltz says, "Like the process I have described, I am a golfer who has converted to skiing in the winter months. I have recently converted to free-lance writing as well, drawing on my experience as a Rocky Mountain trail guide in the summer and a ski instructor in the winter."*

*"Rules of the course" as posted below don't apply for this sport. Skiers don't take divots.*



thirstier than golfers, and are not locked into a schedule.

## What can you expect?

Brad Miller, manager of the Shanty Bay Country Club near Barrie, Ontario, has been in the ski business for 4 years. Like other golf course operators who have successfully converted to winter operations, he has experienced a terrific increase in the volume of his ski business since he began.

"When we started out," Brad says, "we were lucky if we saw over 100 skiers a week. We now count on over 1,000 skiers per week — and if we get especially good conditions, we do even better. The growth rate has been phenomenal and we anticipate even better business next year."

Other operators have experienced similar growth and, like Brad, many are now counting on skiing for 40 percent or more of their annual revenue — and they are still learning about the business. Like Shanty Bay, Golf Haven in Gilford, Ontario, has reflected this growing emphasis by changing its name to Golf-Ski Haven. Any golf course that has snow for 3 months of the year should give this serious thought.

Where does this business come from? Brian and Margaret McCann, who operate a 9-hole golf course in Allandale, Ontario, report: "Our operation caters primarily to families. Like many golf courses, we don't have particularly challenging terrain — but we do offer the novice well-prepared tracks and excellent rental equipment. We estimate that 50 percent of our skiers rent equipment from us. We



do a lot of repeat business and average 20 individual skiers per day over the week. But we do a lot of mid-week business with schools and the local YMCA. We even have occasional bookings with the Grove Park Home for the Aged."

Reaching potential customers effectively has played a large part in the growth of the business, and there is good news here for the operator. Experience has taught that word of mouth is the most effective advertising. In their first years some operators spent several hundred dollars on radio and newspaper promotion. Most now rely primarily on adequate distribution of brochures, particularly to interested groups such as schools. They wisely combine their trail maps with their advertising, since skiers are interested in the extent of a trail system. Good road signs are also an asset.

Once people have visited your golf course/ski area, you want them to be satisfied. Operators have shown considerable ingenuity and originality in making skiing as enjoyable as possible. Brad Miller takes a great deal of pride in his special services. "We look on a ski tour as an outdoor experience. We provide rest areas complete with fire circles, and route as much of our trail system through wooded areas as possible. We also maintain over 70 bird feeding stations en route."

Is this expensive? "Well, when we have school children skiing, they spend every nickle they have on french fries and hot dogs. The birds get the leftover lunches as well as bird feed."

## What investment is needed?

All operators agree that one big attraction is the availability of good rental equipment. The most common mistake they made was using wood skis (which broke) and inferior boots (which wore out) in their first years. The fiberglass ski is now universal for rentals — and extra revenue is earned



*Wooded and other rough and out-of-bounds areas for golf make good places for cross-country ski trails. Avoid tees and greens.*

by selling both new and old equipment. Skis made by Kahru, Fischer, and Bonna are very popular and stand up well to rough usage. Skis are waxed for the customer whenever possible, since an improperly waxed ski can make skiing very frustrating. The owner should count on roughly 50 percent of his customers renting, remembering that half of his renters will likely be under 16. On the average, a complete set of skis, boots, bindings, and poles will cost the operator \$80 to \$100.

There is good news for the operator concerning accidents, since they are very rare and never, to date, serious. Trails designed for safety as well as enjoyment have made them so rare that most operators can scarcely remember an incident.

Needless to say, all this will require an investment, but upkeep of a ski area is far less expensive than that of a golf course. While staff requirements vary with the service provided, a rule of thumb is to allow one staff member per fifty skiers. Equipment, however, is a major expense.

First a few words about outdoor equipment. Since cross-country skiing is in its infancy, techniques for maintaining trails are still in the experimental stage, but most areas have discovered the need for three main items:

First, you must have something to drag your equipment. Alpine ski areas simply use their commercial vehicles such as a Sno-Cat, which is capable of dragging a couple of tons of equipment up a mountain. It's an ideal vehicle — but at \$50,000, a little out of reach of most operators. Brad Miller has procured a logging machine called a Nodwell which he describes as "half tank and half swamp-buggy." Most areas, however, manage very nicely with a heavy-duty snowmobile; the powerful twin-track models priced from \$1,500 to \$3,000 are perfectly adequate.

Secondly, a groomer is essential. This is dragged behind the vehicle,

## One source for cross-country skiing and track-setting equipment

Reliable Racing Supply, located in Glen Falls, N.Y., has been importing and selling track-setting equipment for cross-country skiing for 7 years. Company president Thomas Jacobs told GOLF BUSINESS, "Golf course proprietors have to understand that if they are to be successful in the cross-country ski business, they must prepare the snow for skiing just as they do grass for golf.

"The Larven equipment we sell is manufactured in Sweden and features lightness and maneuverability along with low cost. This is ideal for golf courses which have to protect their fairways and greens from heavy equipment and their operations from heavy investment in new projects such as cross-country skiing."

Larven Snow Scooters, graders, and track setters are pictured here, along with some of the cross-country ski equipment also sold by Reliable Racing Supply. For prices and further information, **circle 300** on the free information card bound into the front of this magazine.



and its function is to pack, smooth, and level the track, which should be 8 feet wide to allow double tracking. It is also used to break up old tracks when they become too icy. Operators have discovered a number of machines which accomplish this. Brad Miller has mounted a common galvanized culvert on an axle. Roy Moe of Golf-Ski Haven and others have invented their own machines. Several manufacturers have marketed a number of groomers and track setters (see box above). This is a new field, and the best advice is to visit local ski areas and see how they handle the problem.

The final item is the tracksetter. Essentially this is a heavy sleigh with some sort of protrusion on the bottom to make parallel ruts. Again there are commercial models available, but many areas manufacture their own.

Another expense is the cost of brochures and maps. You can expect to spend somewhere between \$500 and \$1,000, but remember that combining golf and ski brochures with a trail map will save you money. Depending on the layout of your course, you may wish to issue tickets

to skiers, but not all operators go to this trouble and expense. Local ski resorts are helpful with suggestions here.

Another problem is theft of rental skis. If this causes problems, the best advice is to hold the driver's license of the renter until equipment is returned.

### Do it now

All operators I spoke to were enthusiastic about the success of their venture. It has provided them with an interesting way of increasing their revenue. At an average trail fee of \$1.50 per day and a rental fee of about \$4.00 (more on weekends), this adds up. If your course has an efficient restaurant and lounge, your revenue will increase even more. Roy Moe promotes ski parties in the evening which are heavily booked, and this adds substantially to his business.

Any area which can depend on 3 months of snow would be well advised to consider diversifying into skiing. Since it is a fairly new idea, the first courses to begin will have the edge for years to come. □