

You can turn white snow into green dollars

Winter conversion of otherwise idle golf facilities into profitable winter cross country touring centers has become increasingly popular throughout the Snowbelt states. The relatively low dollar investment and maintenance costs required to operate a cross country touring center can yield exceptionally high returns. In some cases, golf courses can increase annual revenues by as much as 40 percent, plus better amortize the cost of normally vacant property, restaurant facilities and hotels.

Cross country skiing is attractive to a broad range of relatively affluent, upscale people because it is easy to learn, as accessible as the nearest snowfall, is an excellent exercise, and a favorite family pastime. According to industry sources, approximately 4 million people enjoy the sport each year.

Sales of cross country equipment have increased by over 400 percent in the past five years, and significant growth is forecast in the years ahead.

Recreational activities that can be pursued closer to home are expected to prosper, especially considering the high cost and relative scarcity of gasoline.

Golf course owners and managers can either lease their property to responsible local ski touring operators or ski shops, or operate their own ski rental shop, cross country ski school, and concession. In both cases, turf can be well-protected by fencing and warning signs, and maps are usually issued to ensure that ski touring enthusiasts don't stray.

Dick Tremblay, co-owner of Tory Pines Resort in Franconstown, New Hampshire says, "It made good sense to use our hotel, restaurant and golf course during the winter months." The resort converted its 150-acre golf course, and the surrounding 270 acres, into a ski touring center last year.

"Our courses are tree-lined on both sides to provide excellent wind cover. And our location at the base of Crotched Mountain lends an attrac-

tive alpine atmosphere that people seem to like. Now the program is so successful, we sometimes question whether our primary business is golf or skiing."

Turf Protection

Tremblay, who estimates a 35-40 percent increase in yearly resort income last year due to the winter conversion to ski touring, found virtually no turf damage when the snow melted and golfing began in the Spring. "We kept people off the greens and tee areas by posting signs and keeping flagsticks up all year long," he says.

Tory Pines protected their turf further by directing trails away from delicate grass, and by rotating the maintained ski tracks on a regular basis to avoid potentially damaging snow compaction. Skiing was also suspended when there was less than a plentiful amount of snow on the ground, usually two to three feet. Only two to three inches, however, are actually required for cross country skiing.

Proximity to a prime winter ski touring market is an important key to the success of winter cross country skiing conversions, according to Tremblay. Tory Pines is well situated in an excellent snow region. In addition, it's located only a short distance from Concord, Keene and Manchester — three of the largest cities in New Hampshire. The facility also attracts many Boston-area residents during the weekends.

Insurance

Liability coverage is also an important consideration. Although injuries to cross country skiers are rare — ski touring enthusiasts seldom descend as fast as down hill skiers — operators are just as liable for accidents as they are during warmer months.

"As a resort complex," says Tremblay, "we deal with a year-long insurance package that includes liability coverage for cross country skiers. Last year, however, the only injury we incurred was a dislocated thumb."

Liability insurance is also available at moderate costs for members of the National Ski Touring Operator's Association (NSTOA), located in Brattleboro, Vermont. NSTOA insurance is based upon a percentage of skier days, and usually starts at a minimum



Scenes such as these are the delight of cross country skiers. Trails should be carefully marked to avoid crossing the more damage prone areas, such as greens and tees.



fee of \$600.

Start-up costs

Start-up costs for a small cross country ski touring facility are relatively low, compared to key expenses for establishing a golf course, for instance. According to estimates prepared by one cross country ski equipment manufacturer, first-year revenues can be as high as \$19,000 for a small ski touring center in operation for 12 weeks. See table one for a review of basic expenses and sources of revenue, which illustrate the profitability of winter conversion.

Industry assistance

While some golf course owners may already be knowledgeable about cross country skiing, the majority can usually benefit from assistance provided by cross country industry representatives. The best sources are local

ski shops or the National Ski Touring Operator's Association. Trak, Inc., located in Ward Hill, Mass. and a cross country ski manufacturer, has a strong golf course program. Their touring center consultants can offer advice on trail construction and maintenance, explain the set-up of rental equipment programs, promote and handle general administration of the conversion.

Local ski shops might lease your property and assume all responsibility for implementing a cross country skiing program.

The National Ski Touring Operator's Association provides literature and printed guidelines for effective conversion of golf facilities. The organization set standards for marking trails, and acts as a representative for ski touring operators in the U.S. For more information on NSTOA,

contact: Stan Allaben, NSTOA, Box 557, Brattleboro, VT 05301. Phone: 802/257-4341.

Reaching Potential Golfers

Cross country skiing can be highly profitable, and yield added benefits during the rest of the year as well. A golf course touring center can help reach an entirely new sports crowd, one that might now ordinarily consider golf during warmer months. "You can put an older person or child on a pair of cross country skis," says Dick Tremblay, "and in a matter of minutes they're out on your golf course having a ball. It's a great family sport and one that exposes an entirely new and different sports crowd to the golfing environment. The cross country skier of winter might very well turn into a golfer during the rest of the year. □



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