



MAKING THE MOST OF THE PRACTICE GROUND

Colin Jenkins, takes a look at some of the issues in relation to adding a commercial golf range to a golf club's facilities

In the British Isles there are nearly 1500 golf ranges, with a little over 800 of these ranges located on their own as 'stand alone' facilities. Nearly 700 golf clubs have fully functional practice grounds, that is to say a range type system where balls are sold or provided and then collected centrally, cleaned and distributed to other golfers.

Golf clubs have changed substantially over the last 100 years. First, it would be most unlikely for any more 'members clubs' to be built. Originally these clubs or associations were the normal way that clubs came into being. These days golf clubs are built for commercial reasons and, due to changes in society and the law, it would be most unlikely that a group of individuals could create a new club from scratch, although some existing proprietary clubs are still being bought by groups of members.

The original golf club had little need for those wishing to learn the game, as golfers seemed to just materialise, and the lack of practice facilities definitely led to some interesting swings – in fact the quality of golf swings has changed significantly in the last 20 years. There are many reasons for this: improved coaching techniques, video analysis, television, a massive increase in tournament prize funds for professionals and, of course, much improved practice facilities.

Many clubs are struggling to retain their membership numbers as changing social trends in society have made many unwilling to commit to a single club with a large annual fee. Rising house prices and a more inclusive nature for families have caused a major drop-off in the number of full club members in their 20s and early 30s. Golf clubs have always been a useful and rewarding pastime for the retired, but this ageing customer base is an increasing problem for many clubs. The highly prestigious venues, such as Wentworth, Chart Hills and Sunningdale, will rarely struggle to fill their allocation, but even these clubs have invested heavily in the best practice facilities, which their members have come to expect.

Many traditional clubs with a less prestigious tradition are now facing real dilemmas, with the easy option of increasing the subscription rates to counter falling numbers, proving less viable as members decide that golf is just too expensive to support just one club.

The traditional style of membership holds less appeal to young couples and families than the vast array of leisure pursuits open to us all today. Two for One green fee vouchers are readily accepted by too many facilities, fearing that by not swallowing this poison pill they will lose



the decreasing income to other clubs in the area, willing to take a cut price rate. Clubs must also look at different ways of marketing their core product – membership and green fees.

So for those clubs that are less willing to change their rules, relax their dress codes (and embrace breast feeding in the clubhouse!), the answer may well lie in teaching new golfers that are socially acceptable to the rest of the club's membership. Put simply, if you can't find enough suitable members in the market, then 'grow your own'. Clubs may also find that such a policy is lucrative in its own right.

In order to improve the practice facilities of a club to a point where new golfers can be taught there are several points to consider –

The area must be large enough and not just long enough. A good range area would be 300m long by 200m wide. Such a size may seem excessive, but it is the wayward shots that threaten the boundaries, particularly to the right of the course, which can lead to ball escape issues and health and safety problems.

Planning restrictions will often allow a structure to protect golfers from the elements, but if your club wishes to illuminate the range, then such planning consent is far less likely to be achieved. Golf courses tend to be in rural areas, so floodlights will normally be alien to the local residents and the borough's plan.

Although floodlit golf ranges take far more than those without illumination, careful thought must be given to the decision to operate during the winter evenings. Ranges need to be attended and this may require the full clubhouse to be open to provide toilet facilities and possibly food and beverages. Clubs will also have to invest in additional lighting and be prepared to have several additional staff on hand, even if the returns from the range may prove lower than expected.

Access to the site is vital. Too many clubs have introduced a wonderful practice range 500 yards from the clubhouse, so few use it before or after the round.

Dress rules for the range should be less stringent than for formal play, as many will want to use such a facility on the way home from shopping or other normal domestic chores. To enforce a strict code is damaging to the income of the new range.

Almost all ranges should be run by or in conjunction with the PGA professionals engaged at the club. This is not part of the old pals act (the writer is a PGA professional!) but PGA pros are without question best placed to ensure that the new range is used to maximum effect. Lessons for all types of player can be given and once a new golfer is comfortable coming to the club to practice, then he or she can be gently introduced to the other facilities and may well be attracted enough to wish to join the club.

The normally agreed truth about beginners is that they do not mix well with existing golfers. In fact the reverse is true – new golfers mix well with everyone. They are charming, polite, humble, keen to learn and excellent customers – it is a shame the same cannot be said of all existing golfers! The reality is that beginners have to be carefully integrated with experienced golfers. Once their initial set of lessons is complete, some venture out onto the course with no care for others



around them – this is where the trouble can begin. Careful introductions and beginner oriented days are vital. Many ladies sections have a great record of ‘mentoring’ new golfers. Experienced players give up their time to guide new golfers through the minefields of etiquette, rules, the history of the game and even a little socialising to make the new player comfortable and easy in this new environment.

With regard to the physical issues relating to building a new range, there is much to consider. The first decision is vital – is there enough room to safely create a golf range? If the practice area being considered is even fractionally tight for space, then real problems will ensue. Practising golfers are far less accurate than those playing and the number of times an unusually bad or off-line shots occurs will be alarming to some.

Secondly, is there enough demand to justify the expense of building a range? This is to some extent less important, as a practice ground converted to a quality golf range will attract custom that had previously not been considered. Demographic surveys will give some indication of population and lifestyles, but a rule of thumb that is worth considering is that a range can normally expect to take £1 per annum for each of the people that live within 10 minutes of the range. This is assuming that it is floodlit and also that it is offering a good quality facility and is open to all, with reasonable marketing. Do not assume that range users are the same as golfers – many clubs have been surprised at how few of their members actually use the new range, despite voting for its introduction at AGM's and EGM's.



Once the range site has been established, it is best to work backwards from muddy balls to the customers' first approach to the range. The cleaning, collection and distribution of range balls is so often overlooked by those designing the range. If this is not given sufficient thought, then the range will be blighted by extra labour costs and inefficiency forever. Golfers should never see a muddy ball and preferably never see mud, however, the number of ranges where they actually get muddy trying to practice their favourite game is a testament to the lack of forethought or expertise employed in the original design. Many ranges leave this ball management issue so late that they ‘plonk’ the ball management room at the end of the range and trail wet balls daily across an otherwise elegant carpeted range.

For a range to succeed at a golf club it is vital to have the co-operation of the greenkeeping staff, as it is almost always the case that they will be responsible for ball collection and maintaining the outfield and surrounding area. Targets are vital for any range to succeed, but are



a nuisance to avoid with ball collection and cutting equipment. Often clubs expect the additional work and responsibility to be provided for no extra remuneration – this is ridiculous and few people in business expect more work for the same money. It may well be necessary to collect balls at night, if pilferage becomes a problem on the range. This can easily disrupt the workings of the greenkeeping team and so it is sometimes better to have a separate ball picking contract or team of collectors – much depends on the area and the number of balls involved.

In the UK most ranges will need to be cut once a week in the growing season. To clear the range of 95% of the balls on it can take the same time as the remaining 5% of balls, which must all be collected prior to a cut. Cutting the range should be carefully scheduled so that both course and range are not inconvenienced.

There are many other points to consider in establishing a golf range as a paying contribution to a golf club. The best route is to take advice from other clubs that have gone down a similar path, much can be learnt from mistakes!

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