

Lightning and Golf Safety

by Richard Kithil, President
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Golf is an absorbing, usually competitive game. Golfers share the reluctance to quit that sometimes also keeps baseball, softball, or football players on the field longer than is safe during thunderstorms.

Today the proliferation of liability lawsuits relating to public safety has now reached out to include golf course owners and management as well. Even balanced against the attitudes and behaviors described earlier and in spite of the historical belief that lightning is considered an "Act of God", the fact that protection against its harm is possible and available now places a new responsibility on golf courses.

For example, the widow of a golfer who was killed along with two other golfers who were injured by a lightning strike at Quail Chase Golf Course in Jefferson County, Kentucky filed a suit against the course owners charging negligence due to "failure to install and operate adequate warning systems." In another case, a golf course was found negligent by a jury and held liable for the lightning deaths in an unprotected shelter building. The couple's minor children were awarded damages sufficient to pay for their care and education.

To address and resolve these liability considerations and to address the "Duty to Warn" precedent that appears to be developing, there are five steps a golf course's management can take to provide safety for the players and at the same time, protect the course itself from liability in the face of possible lightning casualties.

Step 1. Any golf course in an area of potential lightning strikes should offer golfers a lightning safe club house. For a small course, it may be the only publicly occupied structure; the one reachable safe haven.

Step 2. A thunderstorm warning system should be installed. In some parts of the U.S., lightning warning services are available on a subscription basis. A more preferable step would be to install a reliable warning system on the course itself. In general terms, these devices measure the intensity of the atmospheric electric field. In clear weather, this field is constant between the clouds and the earth. As a storm builds, this constant level (gradient) begins to increase. When these voltage gradients reach a level where a lightning strike is imminent, a preset sensor is triggered and an alarm is sounded. This warning can then be relayed by sirens, etc., to players on the course.

Step 3. Any shelter building on the golf course can become a "lightning trap" because it concentrates potential victims at a time of prime vulnerability during a storm and because its small size places occupants within side flash distance of a lightning strike to the structure. Typically built of wood or concrete block, such structures are poor conductors compared to the human body and should be protected in order to safeguard the occupants.

Step 4. Lone trees and prominent trees in groves are handy shelters from the discomfort of rain. A golf course should be evaluated to determine which trees need to be equipped with special tree lightning protection systems.

Step 5. Printed instructions for golfers on where and how to take shelter during thunderstorms may avert casualties and their consequences when handed out prior to teeing off. In addition, prominently posted signs describing lightning safety measures also are recommended.



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