

Golf & The Fight for Discretionary Dollars

Part II – Fueling the Growth of Golf

by Gregory E. Martin

As golf development continues to boom, current golf course construction remains at a record pace. So far, there have been more course openings in the 90's than in all of the 1980's. Why has golf, in spite of economic cycles and leisure activities so available, enjoyed such rampant growth? There are two specific reasons, I believe, that have fueled the recent growth of golf. They are: television and golf course maintenance techniques.

Primarily, golf's growth in popularity can be traced to television and its implications. Television remains the fuel of the golf explosion. It has exposed us to a variety of appealing aspects of the sport. Each week, we are engaged by the lonely business of the golfers while exhilarated with the surroundings of the golf course architecture. Golf rejuvenates us; we see beautiful courses, hosting million dollar tournaments that attract the finest golfers in the world accomplishing what each weekend golfer can only dream in a perfectly manicured arena.

Television gave us access to the competitors and the courses they play. Television has also given us the opportunity to see exotic places and courses that are sited in the most intriguing and beautiful locations. We can now watch golfers play the enchanted and barren linklands of St. Andrews; we can witness the "back nine" beauty of Augusta with its towering pines, flowering dogwoods and immaculate conditions; or the majestic seaside links at Pebble Beach. This year we saw the simple elegance of Shinnecock Hills, demanding the best from the best.

Television coverage of these courses and their events captured our fascination and prompted an evolution in golf course design. Modern era designs from Dye, Nicklaus, Fazio, the Jones family and others gave us new visual sensations with their concoctions. While these older courses, like Pebble Beach, Shinnecock Hills and Pine Valley were designed using little or no manipulation, modern day architects use sophisticated landform artistry to create distinct 'golfform' features from less attractive and even unusable sites. This evolution of Golf Course Architecture has transformed the industry.

As a result, the most potent "fuel" of the golf industry was borne to accommodate these highly visual and recreationally challenging courses. The era of the televised championship medal play on Tournament of Players Championship Courses has fostered a wider appreciation of the golf environment and with that came the greatest evolutions in the past two decades: golf course maintenance techniques. Each of us see perfectly manicured courses weekly and expect those same conditions at our local municipal or country club.

Maintenance costs have soared in order to produce better conditioned fairways, quicker healing tees, wall to wall irrigation and 'fast' greens. As a result, golf course



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superintendents have a greater understanding of turfgrass requirements that require more sophisticated equipment, irrigation techniques and more elaborate maintenance operations. It is this rising quality and condition "expectation" of the average golfer that has propelled the growth and evolution of the golf industry.

While the standards of the average golfer continue to be raised, golf course architects and superintendents must look to develop more unique challenges with sustainable landscapes. Creative design and maintenance is needed by reducing maintained turf and establishing wet and dry meadows, wildlife refuge areas and more diverse water systems. A positive first step is the Audubon Sanctuary Status. This should be the goal of each and every superintendent, architect or golf manager. The environmental and economic benefits generated by Audubon Sanctuary Status is lasting and will be seen by the golfing public as environmental leadership, aiding the long term interests of the golf industry.

We are certainly intrigued with the sport, too. This game, which was intended for recreation and leisure, gets in our blood. While wrestling with our game every week we are comforted, somewhat, with pleasing pace and the course environment. Because of its relaxing pace, its relationship to the outdoors, its unique challenge and the camaraderie that golf can provide, this sport has become popular across generations and particularly, with masses of baby boomers.

So golf has become a big business. The largest segment of the population is now reaching middle age when earning power is at a peak. It is believed that business conducted on the golf course is second only to the board room. The average player is well educated, has an above average income and is, maybe, most importantly, willing to spend it on golf gadgetry of all shapes and sizes. 15 billion dollars were spent last year on golf related products. This translates into more access to products and a wider requirement for the availability of the sport.

What was once a recreation, a sport afforded by an exclusive leisure class, is now an industry available and demanded by most segments of society. Most professions within the golf industry were learned trades. Colleges now offer studies in Club Management, Golf Course Architecture, and Turfgrass Sciences. It was noted recently, at a Midwest State University, which graduated 30+ from the Turfgrass Science Department 10 years ago now have over 80 in the senior class curriculum. It is clear that golf has developed into an industry.

Maybe the past two decades reflect a second "Golden Age of Golf". While this growth continues, it is necessary to deliberate the inevitable changes that are necessary to sustain the industry through the coming years. As professionals within this industry, we must be acutely aware of the cycles of the sports world. Look at tennis or even baseball. As stewards of the sport we should encourage wider access and greater expectations, but understand that this can encourage scrutiny.



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