

Burgeoning Windy City busts

America's golfing tradition began in Chicago. It had 200 courses in 1929, then took a hiatus in construction

By Mark Leslie

The first two 18-hole golf courses in the United States were built by the Chicago Golf Club in Belmont and Wheaton. By 1929 some 200 courses dotted the Windy City scenery. Yet a seemingly insatiable appetite for golf continues to lead developers to build courses in the area.

"There's never an empty tee time anywhere. The courses are absolutely at max," said Paul Fullmer, executive secretary of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, which is headquartered in Chicago.

"Public courses are full," said Paul Eldredge, vice president of Wadsworth Golf Construction Co. in Plainfield, Ill. "You have to arrange a tee time a week or five days in advance or you can't get on."

Chicago is hot — both as a home to industry and as a hub of golf activity. Dozens of courses are in the works.

Within 30 miles of the city's outskirts, four courses have opened in the past few months, 11 more are under construction or awaiting a spring opening, and at least a dozen are planned.

"It's just popped in the last five years," said Fullmer. "We had a hiatus for 15, 20 years when few courses were built. People thought we had so many we didn't need any more. Chicago is a prime example of a mature market where it is finally recognized that, although we have some 225 courses, there is an unmet demand.

"New courses are satisfying that demand, but there is still the unsatisfied public. Most of the new courses are private, residential-type developments. There are very few that daily-fee players can play."

Fullmer tells of Forest Preserve National in the suburb of Oak Forest, where youths hire out to stand in line at 3 a.m. to get tee times.

Architect Dick Nugent of Long Grove, Ill., who has designed courses in the area for 35 years, said: "The public sector is strong. The



A view of the 17th green and 18th tee at Medinah Country Club, one of many courses rich in history in the Chicago district.

Photo by Tony Roberts

private sector may be a little on the down side because it is tied into housing and real estate, which has taken a temporary blow from the savings and loan situation. As soon as that is straightened out, they will come back strong."

Public courses make up six of the 14 courses that are under construction or just opened. Eight of the 10 in planning are public.

Nugent, who with Ken Killian designed such nuggets as Kemper Lakes in Hawthorn Woods and Forest Preserve National in Oak Forest, said: "Chicago has always been a great golf town. It has a rich tradition... It had a lax period from 1929 to 1955 when a lot of courses went out of business... (Course construction) has been in an upward curve since then — with little spikes during an energy crisis or recession. But since 1982 it has taken

off, driven by a lot of factors.

"There are more people of an age, income and proclivity to play golf. They're tired of shin splints and tennis elbows. We have a kinder and gentler game."

When Chicago golf ended its dormancy, Fullmer said: "A lot of architects wanted to add Chicago to their palette. Tom Fazio did his first (alone) and is now doing his second, Nicklaus came in with his, and Pete Dye is doing one now (Ruffled Feathers with son P.B.).

Fazio, of Jupiter, Fla., who first built a course (Butler National) in the area with his uncle George in 1970, said: "Chicago is a high-profile golf town. It has a lot of outstanding golf courses and there is tremendous golf enthusiasm there. The District of Chicago

has great golf programs."

Noting that the western and northern suburbs grew tremendously in the late 1980s, Fazio said: "When we opened Stonebridge (Aurora), Arnold Palmer did White Eagle (Naperville) and Jack Nicklaus did Wynstone (North Barrington). We had three new golf courses being done at the same time within a few miles of one another. And the Packards had another one close-by (Cantigny in Wheaton)."

CITY SPREADING

What is the Chicago area?

"Many of these courses are being developed 40 to 50 miles from downtown Chicago, which reflects the new lifestyle of America," Fullmer said. "People are working and living on golf courses 30, 40 miles from Chicago.

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There are three new courses in Lake Geneva, Wis., right over the state line, and they basically are appealing to Chicago golfers."

Look in any direction from downtown Chicago, Fullmer said, and you find superb courses. To the north are the likes of Kemper Lakes, Palm Meadow, Glenview, Bob O'Link, Evanston, Skokie and North Shore.

The west side of Chicago boasts courses like Chicago Golf Club, Medinah, Butler National, White Eagle, Wynstone and Stonebridge.

Fullmer said: "People think anything on the south side is slums. But that's not true. You have Olympia Fields, which is one of the best courses in the world. And Flossmore, a very exclusive club and wonderful course... There are pockets of affluence in the south suburbs, which many people don't realize."

The south side was a gold mine for Eugene Corley, owner of Corley Real Estate Corp. in Northbrook and developer of the region's first golf course community, Mission Hills, in the early 1970s.

Corley researched the south side, found a market existed for a residential development, and hired a "brand-name designer" Robert Trent Jones Jr. to design a course as the centerpiece of Crystal Tree development in Orland Park. It was basically sold out before the course even opened.

"We were very successful, but we found the market was not that deep," Corley said.



Developer Eugene Corley said the Robert Trent Jones Jr. name sold memberships in this course, Crystal Tree in Orland Park.

He feels Crystal Tree, with its 440 single-family homes and townhouses, absorbed all that type of clientele who were there.

But Corley is high on other markets around Chicago, especially in DuPage County to the west and Lake County to the north.

"DuPage is and will continue to be the leading county in the metropolitan area in job growth. Lake County is second and forecasted to remain there. That means housing growth," he said, and that translates to golf course growth.

Fullmer said: "A lot of towns (outside Chicago) were sleepy for years and now, all of a sudden, are booming..."

"I see a Phase Two ahead. I see the residential development continuing. And I do think there are going to be more people building public, daily-fee courses, because you can't get on a Cog Hill, or Kemper, or Pine Meadows, or Cantigny without a huge wait."

Indeed, five of the 12 projects in planning are municipal courses in Aurora, Beach Park, Channahon, Plainfield and Lisle.

Wadsworth Construction's Eldredge explained: "Generally, when development work reaches a peak and the economy is good, that's when communities pass bond referendums and start planning for the future. By the time the economy slows... those projects are ready to get off the ground. That's about where we are right now. We hit the peak in the economy about a year or 18 months ago and a lot of these municipalities have their act together and are starting to build some courses."

"I think we're going to see an upswing. There certainly will be a more favorable ratio of public to private courses."

Progress of projects

Chicago area courses recently opened:

Community	Course	Type
Lake in the Hills	Boulder Ridge CC	P
Marengo	Marengo Ridge G&CC	D
Orland Park	Crystal Tree	P
Woodstock	Bull Valley (2nd 9)	P

Chicago area courses under construction or ready to open:

Community	Course	Type
Batavia	Settlers Hills	M
Cary	IGM course	P
Chicago Heights	Park District course	M
Elgin	Irongate	P
Geneva	Eagle Brook	P
Lake Forest	Conway Farms	P
Mundelein	Ivanhoe Club	P
Mundelein	Countryside GC	M
Naperville	Naperbrook	M
Plainfield	Carillon	D
Woodridge	Seven Bridges	P

Chicago area courses planned:

Community	Course	Type
Aurora	Orchard Valley	M
Beach Park	Beach Park GC	M
Bristol	Blackberry Oaks GC	D
Channahon	Channahon Park GC	M
Chicago	DePage Airport GC	D
Highland	N/A	P
Lisle	Lisle Park GC	M
Lockport	Broken Arrow GC	D
Long Grove	Royal Melbourne	P
Mundelein	Mundelein Park GC	M
Plainfield	N/A	D
S. Barrington	Carrowmore	P

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