

Higher demand fuels unprecedented growth

Ranges

Ranges offering practice areas by weeks open

Number of weeks open	Practice area			
	Chipping green	Putting green	Practice traps	None
Less than 35	39.5	17.3	38.3	43.2
35-44	54.2	16.7	37.5	33.3
Over 45	52.6	46.3	51.6	31.6
Overall avg.	48.0	31.4	43.6	36.3

By Bob Spiwak

While industries nationwide are plagued by recession, the golf, or practice range industry has grown in all respects — geographic, number, ancillary services and revenues.

A golf range association has been born. A publication for the industry has been launched. A new concept in ranges including fitness centers, miniature golf, and electronic stuff that might put Buck Rogers on the Tour is appearing. An industry trade show is set for Chicago next January.

Steve di Costanzo, executive director of the

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infant Golf Range and Recreation Association of America (GRRAA), reports that the number of ranges built in 1991 increased 53 percent over 1990.

Mark Grothe, golf ball marketing manager of Spalding, said, "1991 was a big jump (in range ball sales) over 1990." He estimated 50 percent.

Terry Sopko, vice president of Wittek in Chicago, which manufactures and distributes range equipment to the world, said the growth in indoor golf facilities has "skyrocketed." He cited the 100-percent sales increase of the company's new rubber "safety putter."

What have putters to do with driving — pardon — golf ranges?

The answer will help explain the nomenclature, in the same manner as "women's tees" was changed to "forward tees" to reflect modern times. Simply put, ranges have evolved to the point where they are visited to experience a total

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Working to make practice more perfect

High-end, "ultimate" range facilities carve their niche

By Lisa Maki

Practice makes perfect, but what makes perfect practice? An optimum practice facility must meet the golfer's primary needs — physical and psychological.

Such perfect facilities are scarce, no matter what a golfer's skill level or what caliber course he plays: cow pasture or country club.

Throughout the country, golf courses have a common problem — inadequate practice facilities. Municipal courses often show more concern for picking up balls than hitting them.

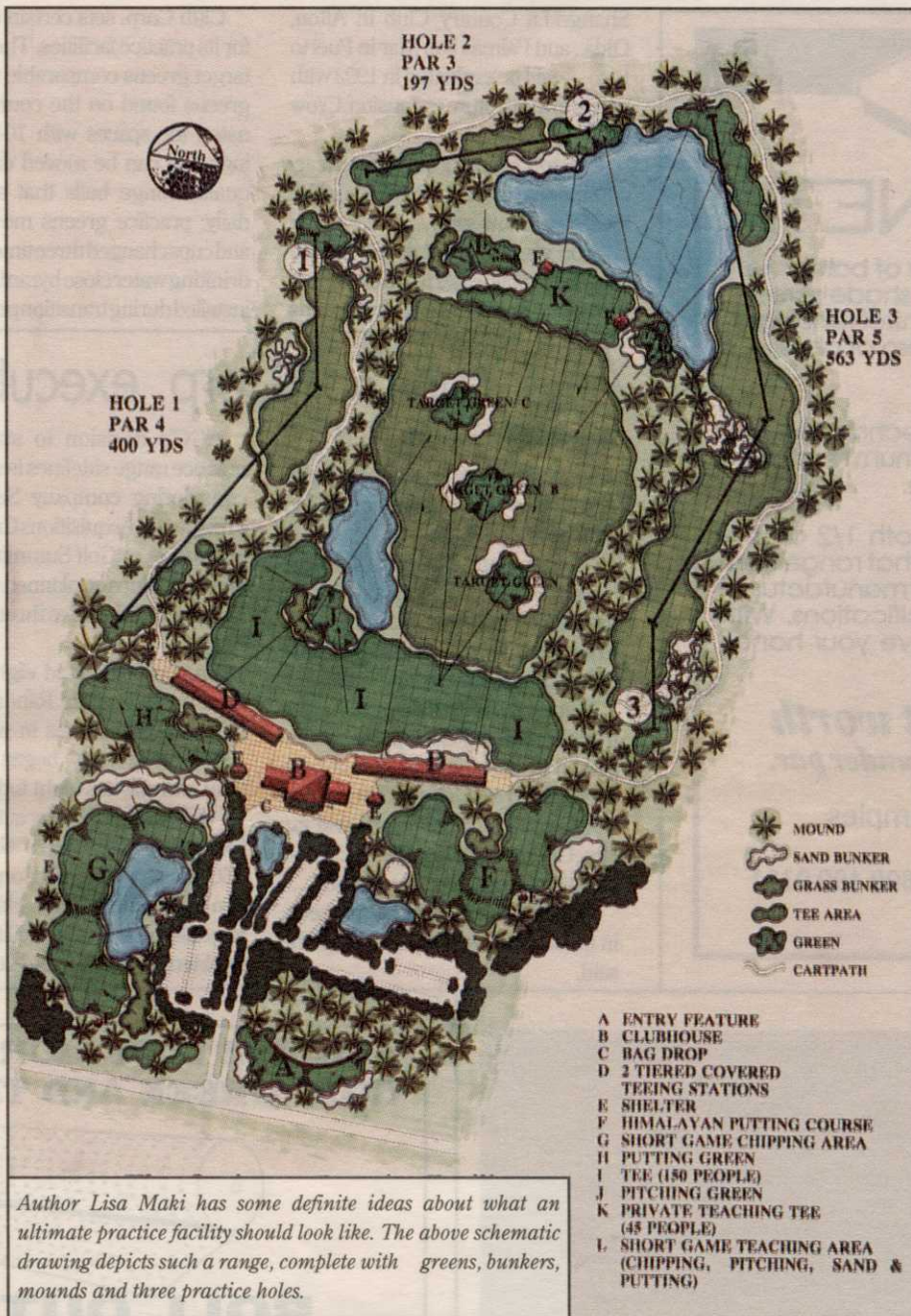
Private courses have generally compromised their practice areas, squeezing in extra homesites, leaving small ranges with no specialty shots.

Well-meaning entrepreneurs tried to respond to this dilemma by creating "golf entertainment centers" complete with batting cages, video arcades, putt-putt courses, and rubber matts. These centers sprang up at major intersections across the country. They did little to satisfy serious golfers' desire to improve their game.

An alternative to cow pastures, country clubs and entertainment centers appears to be gaining popularity — the high-end daily-fee golf club

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Lisa Maki is president of Golf Design Services of Round Hill, Va. She was a golf course designer/project manager with Links Design, Inc. of Lakeland, Fla., from 1984 to 1989.



Author Lisa Maki has some definite ideas about what an ultimate practice facility should look like. The above schematic drawing depicts such a range, complete with greens, bunkers, mounds and three practice holes.

American Golf executive: Market runs the risk of over-expansion

By Peter Blais

The market for practice range facilities may not be as bright as many believe, according to an executive with one of the nation's largest course management companies.

The past few years, many ill-conceived projects have been built in areas with insufficient demand, said Joe Guerra, senior vice president of corporate development with American Golf Corp.

Consequently, some municipalities are overstocked with practice centers, a situation that isn't likely to change until a few go belly up, Guerra said.

For example, two practice centers were recently built within five miles of AGC's Irvine, Calif., facility. While it isn't meeting expectations, the AGC center is still earning a fair return, Guerra said. But Irvine can't support the additional 150 new hitting stations and he expects the new facilities to have a tough time surviving.

"Many new practice ranges were built on headlines rather than sound economics," the AGC executive said. "The developers wanted in on what they saw as a glamorous business."

"One of the main problems is that the barriers to entry are so low. You can build a range for \$500,000 to \$1 million and 12 acres of land. A lot of people wanted to get into the business and were willing to mortgage the house to do so. But the market just didn't justify the investment."

Many developers bought land when they would have been better off signing a long-term lease, the AGC executive said. Those projects performing best are generally on land the developers have owned and operated as practice ranges for many years, adding

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— AGC's Joe Guerra

Aqua range delivers novelty, profitability

By Lisa Maki

One trend that may further aid the rebirth of practice facilities — even the cow pastures and country clubs — is the aqua range, which combines beauty, drama, challenge and shot value, not to mention the novelty of floating golf balls.

The notion of hitting balls into a lake may sound counterproductive.

But the aqua range generates income and offers the developer a number of advantages: increased value of neighboring homes, de-

creased maintenance costs, and the fill necessary for further development.

Jim Cocchi, director of golf at Glenn Lakes Golf Club in Weeki Wachee, Fla., supports the aqua range concept.

Cocchi said his clients enjoy the aqua range, and it's been very profitable.

Its success can be partially linked to Cocchi's belief in supplying good quality balls. Although floating balls are about 60 cents more expensive than ordinary balls, the initial investment will be returned in kind, he said.



The aqua range and short game practice area at Glenn Lakes in Florida.

Industry indicators point to unprecedented growth

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golf experience — something beyond teeing it up and blasting it out to the sign.

Even the PGA has incorporated the name change in its constitution.

The fields are both prosaic and esthetic. Ball picker sales are up, along with other range equipment, said Sopko.

From headquarters in Lake Grove, N.Y., Nannette Poillon, owner of American Indoor Golf and distributor for Golftek simulators, described a piece of equipment that offers computerized course mapping ("Every pebble and contour of a given course is known and reproduced by the computer.") which allows a player, indoors, to use regulation clubs and balls, have balls bounce accurately off berms, be subjected to wind effects and have the swing analyzed as birds chirp in the background.

"Golf learning centers," they are called.

Poillon reports the simulator was installed indoors at a Michigan range, Keldin, that had 25 outdoor

tees and a 2,400-square-foot pro shop. Prompted to "play the popular Myrtle Beach courses," people signed up before the simulator was delivered.

Scott Schirmer, editor and publisher of *Golf Range Times* in St. Louis, began the 20-page bi-monthly trade paper last July.

Schirmer said the first issue had two ads. Four editions later, ads started coming to him unsolicited. Offered free to 2,200 public-access ranges in the United States, GRT "provides suppliers of golf practice ranges with a cost-effective advertising medium in the form of an informative and interesting publication for range owners," Schirmer said.

Reflecting the wider, more diversified nature of ranges, the Golf Range and Recreation Association of America was born in January and already has 285 members. Members own and operate traditional ranges, indoor golf and miniature facilities.

Di Costanzo portrayed GRRAA as "the only association dedicated to golf range facilities and management."

He said: "GRRAA was formed because the growth in the industry the last two years has been tremendous. Critical mass has been reached in this industry."

Di Costanzo expects a membership of 1,000 by year's end, with more to come.

"The (range) 'universe' contains 4,000 to 5,000 facility operators," he explained. The organization will offer a newsletter, insurance benefits, legal services and equipment discounts to members," he said.

DATA TELLS THE STORY

Scott Marlowe is market analyst at Forecast Golf Marketing & Financial Systems, Inc. in Richmond, Va. Ask him a question about the industry and he'll pull an answer out of his data base.

Is the number of ranges increasing?

"Lord, yes! There was a 53.6-percent increase in 1991 over 1990," he said, then asked, "Do you want the numbers pertaining to on-course or free-standing, or indoor, or aqua ranges, too?"

Forecast's data answers the

question about the solvency of ranges. Marlowe said about one-tenth of one percent of all public-access ranges failed in the last year, which is about one-fifth the rate of the number for all amusements and recreation services, and about one-seventh of the national failure rate for all U.S. businesses.

"There has been an explosion in ranges," Marlowe continued. "They have increased eight times the rate of golf courses. Landowners are looking for a land bank, course operators for an additional source of revenue."

Firing another salvo of statistics, Marlowe offered this: In 1989 83 percent of PGA-affiliated courses had a range, and 45.4 percent of the remaining courses offered the facility.

Municipalities are finding ranges a source of revenue. A case in point is Crystal Lake, Ill. A suburb of Chicago, its park district serves about 40,000 people.

Jim Miller, superintendent of recreation, said the city has a park project of about 200 acres. "We are looking at a way to generate rev-

enue, and with what the range will produce, we can partially fund other projects," Miller said. "There are a lot of advantages, like no taxes. The public has used surrounding ranges, and this one appears to be a 'can't-miss' situation."

The 15- to 20-acre range, still in the planning stages, is being designed by Lohmann Golf Designs of Marengo, Ill. Lohmann architect Phil Sage said ranges usually occupy around 10 acres. The Crystal Lake facility will be larger as, "We are getting into more upscale facilities with sand bunkers and chipping greens. There will be a long-grass area for practice from the rough, mounds and depressions at either end to practice from."

"Golf," Sage said, "is getting more competitive. You have to cater to the person who just got a new sand wedge and wants to practice with it."

THE 'USED' MARKET

Grothe, of Spalding, said the life of a new range ball is about one year. As

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NEWS**

High-end practice facilities offer challenges & the spice of life

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complete with practice facilities.

Developers are responding to the void in the industry by supplying a quality mid-market product.

The theme "strictly a golf club" and "development of the game" seem to be the wave of the future. The higher green fees these high-end daily-fee courses charge have both necessitated and allowed development.

Customers are serious about practicing, to get the most out of their game. Today's architects are rewarding them by mixing the majesty of classic courses and golf tradition with new creative concepts.

This combination of the past, present and future design concepts has created a surging demand for developers to provide the facilities where golfers can adapt their techniques to these modern but traditional courses.

An optimum practice facility sub-

tly advocates practice by providing the necessary mental atmosphere and physical setting.

Important are an assorted physical components: perched greens, plateaued landing areas, native grasses, uphill lies, lateral and crossing water hazards, thick rough, low-profile greens, downhill lies, towering pines, strategically placed bunkers, hillocks, sidehill lies, pot bunkers, dense woods, dunes, flat lies, waste areas, grassy hollows, uneven stances, gaping sand bunkers, and tight targets. All of these attributes can and have been incorpo-

rated into the high-end practice facility.

Such characteristics provide the appropriate tools for developing distance perception and a palette of shots: bump-and-run, forced carry, working right to left and left to right, long exacting iron, open drive, lob, bite off, chip, finesse, pitch, strategic thinking hole, blind, heroic, and sand wedge through driver.

A person who has chosen practicing golf as a recreational activity should have privacy, concentration, absorption, excitement, challenge, confi-

dence, encouragement, optimism, and hope.

An intense but comfortable mood must be created so the golfer can concentrate on the target and the shot at hand. Distractions must be minimal. A relaxed atmosphere induces internalization, visualization and focus that practicing requires.

For a golfer to conclude a practice session feeling a sense of achievement and satisfaction, two types of participation must occur — physical and psychological.

Most "driving ranges" make physi-

cal participation easy. However, they do not encourage psychological participation.

Bobby Jones said it best: "The first purpose of any golf course should be to give pleasure, and that to the greatest number of players."

To accomplish Jones' objective, practice needs a wide variety. Providing diversity is a key factor in satisfying these needs, and ultimately in the success of a practice facility.

Repetition is boring.

Variety induces concentration.

The used market

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balls get worn, more prosperous ranges will sell or trade them to other ranges, and purchase new ones.

"It's like the used-car market," he said. "There is a second-tier market in range balls."

Grothe would not divulge any numbers as to volume or dollars of the company's two-piece range ball.

As Spalding claims to be the largest ball maker in the world, Wittek, of Chicago, assumes that position in golf range equipment. Both manufacturer and distributor, Wittek serves courses and ranges around the world.

According to Sopko, Wittek invented the first ball picker for ranges. The company deals in new and recycled balls, all heavy range equipment and parts, mats, washers, tees, dispensers and lighting systems to name a few. "Indoor golf facilities have skyrocketed," Sopko said. "Off-course pro shop display items are up... Miniature golf is up."

Sopko noted the phenomenon has reached Poland, where a facility is being planned.

Wittek also is involved in the preliminary planning stages for ranges.

"The range and miniature field is just growing," he said. "Business is up. The need and potential are there."

It's not only swinging clubs at these places. Poillon offered results of a 1990 study of golf learning centers, which also offer associated health clubs, diagnostic equipment, classrooms and actual ball striking.

The study showed an existing market of \$60 million in 1990 and forecast 19-percent growth by 1995.

Said Poillon: "People who are entering the range business or rejuvenating older facilities are looking to new types of amenities and revenue producers, looking for more than sales of buckets of balls. The overhead does not increase, the fixed payment does not decrease. A learning center, indoors, out or both, can keep a flow of activity and revenue going in other than the prime season."

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