

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.

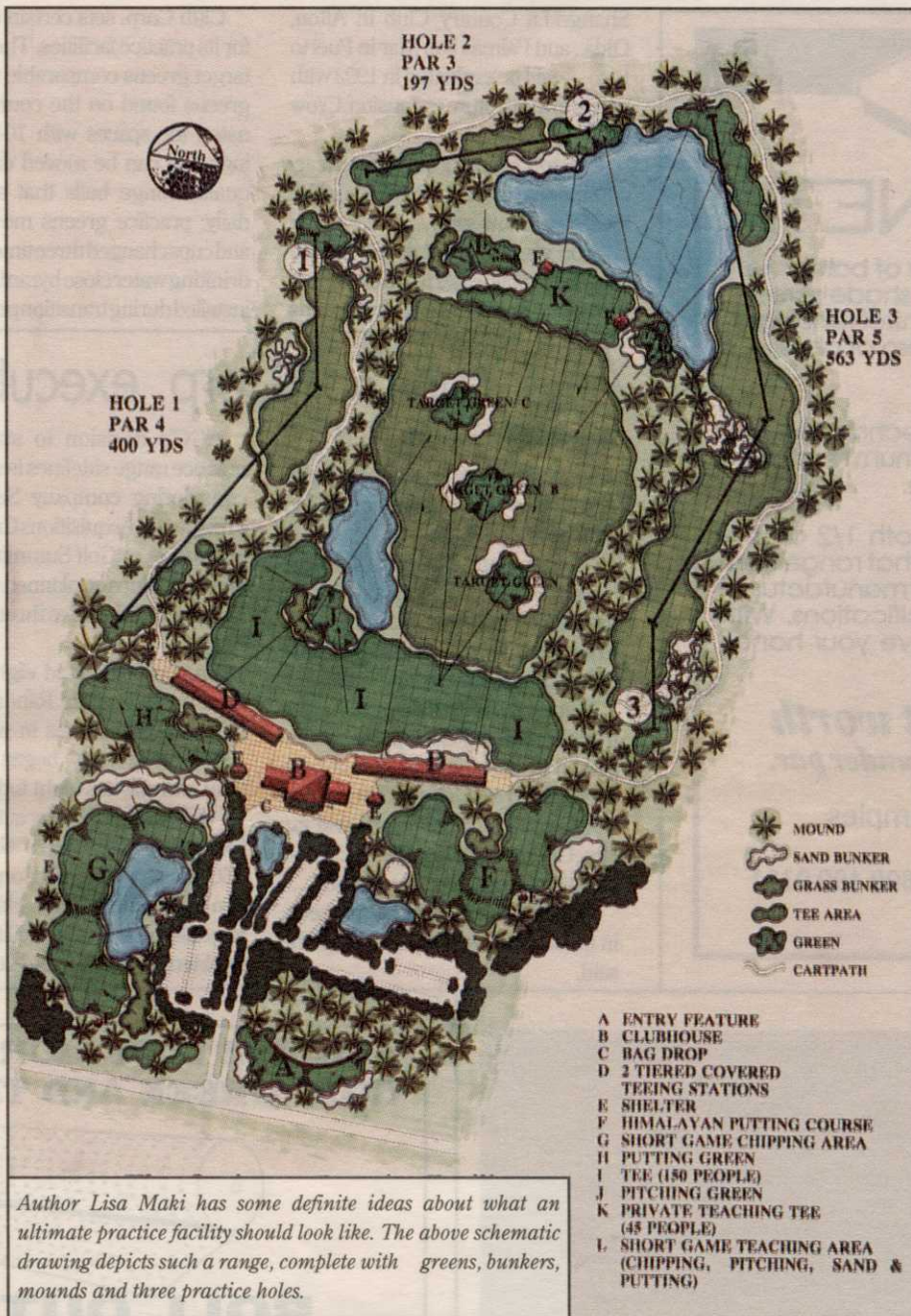
Private courses have generally compromised their practice areas, squeezing in extra homesites, leaving small ranges with no specialty shots.

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.

Club Corporation plans company-wide range upgrades

By Peter Blais

One of the country's largest management companies is upgrading practice facilities at most its courses and may soon be building more stand-alone ranges.

"It used to be that the practice range was the last thing that entered your mind," said Jerry Diamond, Club Corporation of America's director of golf course operations.

"Now we're upgrading everything we have."

Why are ranges so important?

"Ranges have become a vital tool for golfers to learn to play the game.

They want to improve, and the only way to do that is through practice," Diamond said.

The desire of golfers to become more proficient is evident at Pinehurst Country Club, the flagship of Club Corp.'s resort division.

"It used to be the practice range was busy in the morning and dead at night," said Ken Crow, director of the company's Golf Advantage Schools. "But you walk by at 5 p.m. now and it's packed. To play at that higher level, people realize they have to be out there before and after they play their round."

To meet the increased demand, Pinehurst recently renovated its practice area, expanding the tee area by 30 percent and building more target greens. Hitting areas are rotated frequently, divots patched daily and tees and fairways maintained at the same level they are on the courses. That has meant a moderate increase in maintenance costs, Crow added.

The practice facility at Barton Creek in Austin, Texas, expanded last year. Shanty Creek/Schuss Mountain in Bellaire, Mich., will expand this summer. Remaining Club Corp. resorts — Quail Hollow in Cleveland, Shangri-La Country Club in Afton, Okla., and Palmas Del Mar in Puerto Rico — will be evaluated in 1992 with an eye toward future expansion, Crow said.

A 10-to-12-acre facility that can accommodate at least 40 golfers is the ideal size, Crow said.

"You want to get it as big as you can," he explained. "How fast the turf recovers also affects size. It depends

on the part of the country. In the North Carolina heat, ryegrass recovers slowly so you need more area.

"You want the turf to be the highest quality possible. After all, people are paying \$80 or more for a round of golf. They deserve the best we can deliver."

The same philosophy holds at Club Corp.'s private facilities, according to Jim Huckaby, golf adviser for the Central region, extending from Texas through Kansas.

Club Corp. has renovated four of Huckaby's 25 courses. The rest are in line for facelifts.

Club Corp. sets certain standards for its practice facilities. They include target greens comparable to regular greens found on the course; designated tee spaces with 10-foot spacings that can be moved daily; high-quality range balls that are culled daily; practice greens mowed daily and cups changed three times weekly; drinking water close by; artificial mats installed during transition periods; and

fully maintained practice bunkers.

All this can be expensive. Renovations at a small Houston club called Quail Creek will cost \$100,000, Huckaby said.

The only area with an uncertain future is Club Corp.'s stand-alone practice ranges, the PGA Tour Family Golf Centers. Club Corp. and the Tour jointly operate two facilities, one in Arlington, Texas, opened three years ago and the other in Clearwater, Fla., opened five years back, said Andrew Crosson, Club Corp.'s vice president of new business development.

None have been built since and the PGA Tour has asked Club Corp. not to comment about them until the Tour decides on its future involvement at a May 25 meeting, Crosson added.

"It's a market with relatively few barriers to entry," commented Crosson when asked if all the Mom-and-Pop operations opening recently have affected expansion plans. "You need a very, very good site to make a go of it."

American Golf Corp. executive issues warning

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value through golf schools, equipment sales and customer satisfaction, he added.

"None of our practice facilities are on land we own," Guerra said. "It's not the highest and best use of the land. In general, it's a mistake to purchase rather than lease the land."

Some newer facilities are having trouble meeting debt payments incurred to buy the land. Some have approached AGC about joint partnerships, investment packages and the like, Guerra said. But the California-based company has steered clear.

"From the *pro formas* we've seen, in most cases, we just can't help," he said.

AGC's decision to stay on the practice range sidelines is surprising, considering company Senior Vice President of Acquisitions Craig Price's comments at Golf Summit '90. Price said his company planned to develop new practice facilities throughout the decade.

The company had eight facilities then (including the Randalls Island, N.Y. facility that was in planning in 1990 and recently began construction) and still has eight today.


"We wanted to grow at the pace of four new facilities a year," Guerra said. "CCA Silband (a Club Corporation of America subsidiary including the Randalls Island, N.Y. facility that was in planning in 1990 and recently be-

gan construction) wanted to do about the same. It ain't going to happen.

"There is too much hype out there now. Practice facilities are going through the same cycle the golf course development business went through recently. People are fanatical about getting into the business, but they just don't know how to run it."

AGC won't stay on the sidelines forever. An inevitable shake-out should leave some prime properties and opportunities available, he predicted.

"The ideal situation for a new facility is a 450,000 population within a five-mile radius. There are not many places like that. And land is so expensive. We'll see what happens."



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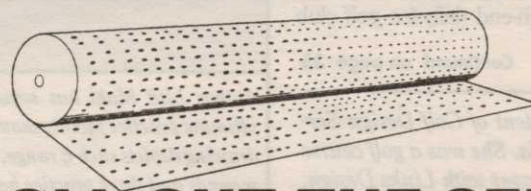
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