

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

Continued from page 31

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) cluding 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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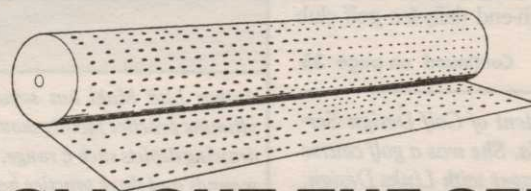
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