

Stats tell the tale: Courses built where they are needed most



Hal Phillips,
editor

Our friends at the National Golf Foundation have closed the book, as it were, on the 1996 development year (which is sort of like the geophysical year, minus the long division). In its report, "Golf Facilities in the U.S., 1997 Edition," the NGF has compiled an interesting set of figures, most of which bode well for the golf course industry.

While the report shows that 442 facilities of various shapes and sizes opened for business during 1996, the number of nine-hole projects — many of them expansions — transforms the 442 figure into 319.5 18-hole equivalents. By means of comparison, in 1995 when a record 468 courses came on line, it translated into 336 18-hole equivalents.

The NGF report says 174 or 40 percent of the 442 openings last year were nine-hole additions. Tracking data shows that approximately one-third of those courses built over the past five years have been additions to existing facilities and 85 percent of these expansions were nine-holers.

What does all this mean? Well, to me it indicates the number of pie-in-the-sky development types — the guys who "have always dreamed of building a golf course" — is smaller than we once thought. It means the "developers" of these additions are experienced golf industry veterans, i.e. owners of facilities doing well enough to expand.

This information also meshes well with the NGF's assertion (GCN February 1997) that courses are being built where demand is greatest. It follows that, if existing courses are expanding, they are increasing supply to meet evidently distended demand.

If we take this assertion to its logical conclusion, the huge numbers of golf courses now under construction — 850, according to the NGF — should prompt no fears of oversupply. At some point, if course construction continues at the current pace, there will be a glut of golf facilities here in the U.S. of A. However, I maintain that as long as existing owners see the need to expand — and 33 percent of the 850 courses under construction are additions — then supply has not yet exceeded demand.

Keep an eye on those expansions. When they drop, the current boom cycle has run its course.

Two more tidbits from the NGF report, which can be obtained by calling 1-800-733-6006:

- Just how prevalent is the high-end, upscale daily-fee model? This is commonly acknowledged to be the flavor of the decade, but things may be changing. The NGF followed up with the owners/operators of the 135 stand-alone facilities (as opposed to the expansions) that opened during 1996. A mere 25 percent of the 105 respondents said their weekend green fees are above the average for similar courses in their respective markets. The other 75 percent claim they come in below the average. Hmm... Either they're lying or developers are finally beginning to identify market niches all along the price spectrum.

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Don't chuck out invention ... yet

Just as "necessity is the mother of invention," so it stands that "timing is everything." Confused? Check out these two for- instances:

1) Twelve years ago a Mr. Forrester in Australia invented the greens roller. But he couldn't sell it. There was no use for it. Today, with more high-sand root zones, greens don't compact, so rolling them becomes a (growingly acceptable) option.

2) Back in the 1950s bentgrasses were developed that performed well only when cut at extremely (for then) low heights of 1/8 inch. If not cut low they became "puffy" and scalped. Yet grass was being cut at 1/4-inch height in the '50s. So what happened to those bents? "They were thrown out," recalled Dr. James Beard.

My, times have changed.

But now's the '90s. Just as drive-ins have gone the way of black-and-white films, so have 7-foot green speeds and 1/4-inch-high putting greens gone the way of featheries. So we see the rise of greens rollers and the new Penn G-series and A-series bentgrasses that, like those grasses from the '50s, need to be cut ultra-low.

"At cutting heights at 3.2 millimeters (1/8 inch), suddenly they [As and Gs] are performing very well," Beard told an audience of Canadian superintendents in Montreal in March.

(Not to allow this to be a promo for these grasses, Beard added: "Are the new Penn-series bentgrasses for everyone? Probably not. You have to mow them tight. Their density and vigor will mean all kinds of thatch problems... There is a learning curve on their culture. They have density that dictates different vertical cutting, different top-dressing regimes and different approaches in terms of nutrition.)

The moral of the story? Don't toss out those old inventions!

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What about rollers? On greens with high-sand root zones and that are not Penn As or Bs, we have a couple of comments for superintendents:

- You can mow the grass higher and roll it to keep up the ball speed.

- When you compare lower mowing versus rolling, "lower

mowing results in weakened turfgrass, shallow rooting, more moss and algae problems and the controls that are required for that," according to Beard.

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Dr. Frank Rossi, assistant professor at Cornell University, said: "In the United States, IPM has become a political football, where people automatically assume you primarily are using biological control and that you do not use pesticides. Inside the industry, a lot of people think IPM costs more to do. You might spend more money in particular places like labor, but you also might spend less on pesticides."

Rossi was speaking at the Canadian International Turfgrass Conference and Show in Montreal.

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This mystery number from Chris Hartwiger, agronomist with the USGA Green Section's Southeast Region: 2,059,200.

What is it? The average number of spike marks made by 200 golfers during an 18-hole round of golf.

Questions, anyone?

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Horton joins GCN Advisory Board

YARMOUTH, Maine — Ted Horton, vice president of resource management for Pebble Beach Co. in Pebble Beach, Calif., has joined the Golf Course News Editorial Advisory Board.

"We're thrilled to have Ted aboard," said GCN Publisher Charles von Brecht. "It's important for us to be able to call upon his expansive knowledge of golf — not just in turf but in administration. His wisdom and integrity are acknowledged throughout the industry."

"We had a strong board. He makes it stronger."

Horton joins Brent Wadsworth of Wadsworth Golf Construction Co., architect Dr. Michael Hurdzan and superintendents Raymond Davies, Kevin Downing, Tim Hiers, Patty Knaggs and Kevin Ross on the board.

A certified golf course superintendent and former country club general manager, Horton joined Pebble Beach Co. in 1993. He has been presented a Citation of Performance by the U.S. Golf Association (USGA) and Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA), the Sherwood A. Moore Distinguished Service Award for Professionalism by the Metropolitan Golf Course Superintendents Association (Met GCSA) and the GCSAA's Leo Feser Award for best magazine article of the year.



Ted Horton

He held every officer position with Met GCSA.

The Montreal native was the superintendent for 12 years at 36-hole Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, N.Y., where he prepared the course for three U.S. Open tournaments. He moved to 45-hole Westchester Country Club in Rye, N.Y., where he hosted 12 PGA Tour events, and was director of sports and grounds. He then took a post as vice president of agronomy for The Fairways Group from 1991 to 1992.

Horton has taught numerous courses for the GCSAA and written articles for various publications. He holds degrees in agricultural biology from McGill University in Montreal, turfgrass management from the University of Massachusetts and club management from Manhattanville College.

He has consulted for various facilities, including Dar Es Salam Golf Course in Rabat, Morocco, Waterville (Ireland) Golf Club, Royal Gems Golf Club in Bangkok, Thailand, and Yao Golf Club in Kaohsiung, Taiwan.



Mark Leslie,
managing editor

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Phillips comment

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ues to dominate the marketplace. A full 382 or 88 percent of last year's 442 openings were daily-fee, municipal or resort. When will the public at-large begin to acknowledge that golf can't possibly be so snotty a pursuit when 70 percent of the nation's courses are open to anyone? Unfortunately, while the call for more

entry-level facilities has grown in volume since 1991, the industry hasn't responded. Last year, only 21 executive courses and 20 par-3s were counted among the 442 openings. As a percentage of openings, this number has remained flat for five years.

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Just returned from Munich where more than 1,000 delegates and 100 exhibitors gathered for Fairway '97, probably the best golf

industry show in Europe.

While most of the attendees were German, or traveled to Munich from nearby Switzerland, Austria and The Czech Republic, the Fairway show has a good chance to grow. Why? Because it's centrally located — where it can potentially draw attendees from France, Italy, the Low Countries, and the surprisingly busy Central European region. Further, the show is ex-

tremely well administered.

Most important to the success of Fairway is the German market itself, which continues to grow despite heavy opposition from environmentalists, who've persuaded the government to implement restrictive wetlands and earth-moving restrictions (see story page xx). However, there are some 500 courses operating in Germany, with roughly 40 coming on line each

year. Not knock-your-socks-off growth, but solid for Europe.

Another good sign: My informal but fairly extensive poll of European and British experts confirms what we've expected for some time — namely, that American maintenance practices are slowly creeping into the mainstream Over There. As more courses are constructed in Europe, competition among clubs has increased and conditioning has emerged as a key differentiator. The British Open may always be played on the decidedly off-color fairways of Birkdale and Muirfield, where membership waiting lists will never shrink. However, the less prestigious facilities — those that must compete for members and green fees — can no longer afford the complacency.

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From the "Sincerest Form of Flattery Department":

Couldn't help but notice some of the changes Golf Course Management chose to implement as part of its recent redesign. Let's see, first we have the "Front Nine" — a news section, located in the first few pages, featuring brief articles on happenings in the golf course industry. Hmmm...

Then we have "Tournament Spotlight," which profiles a superintendent and his or her preparations for an upcoming Tour event. Interesting...

Finally there is "Turf Talk," a question-and-answer page addressing agronomic and other superintendent-related concerns. Now, there's a good idea.

In each case, the folks at the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America have certainly identified and delivered subjects of concern to superintendents. Where do they come up with this stuff?

Leslie comment

Continued from page 10

The proof that there is an organization for everyone on this green earth: The Cigar Smoking Golfers Association (CSGA) has been established in Alexandria, Va. It was created by a John Willet to cater to the serious or not-so-serious golfer who enjoys cigars but wants to learn more about them, and the cigar aficionado who wants to become a more serious golfer. Membership dues are \$35 a year and benefits will include monthly cigar discount special, members-only dinners and clinics, a monthly newsletter, merchandise, and an opportunity to participate in The Cigar Open, a regional qualifying tournament for The National Cigar Open. Call Willet at 703-644-7433, or Tournament Director Walt Galanty at 703-549-9500... but put out those smelly things before entering the clubhouse, please.

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