

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,
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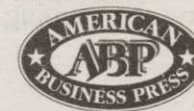
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