

## Time to don the banana suit?

In case you didn't notice, this month begins our all-out marketing push for Public Golf Forum (PGF), the *Golf Course News*-sponsored conference and expo for superintendents, developers, owners and operators of public-access golf courses on Oct. 27 & 28 in Oak Brook Hills, Ill., headlined by the legendary Billy Casper.

See, got the whole plug in the lead.

Shameless.

Of course, you may be the type who feels you already have too many conferences, meetings and trade shows on your plate. In that case you may pass it by — another brochure for the trash. True, your time and resources can only be spread so far and the market for your conference dollar has never been more competitive.

But if you own, operate, manage or maintain a public course, you may want to think twice before you toss another PGF brochure in the can. Some recent National Golf Foundation (NGF) figures tell an interesting story — one you may know — since it could be changing the way you're doing business at this moment.

From 1986 through 1996, 80 percent of the golf courses opened were public access. In 1996, 88 percent of all new courses opened were public (see statistics on page 3). There're now a staggering 3,267 courses in existence in the East North Central region alone. Now, put those figures next to the fact that player-participation growth rates for the past six years have been simply stagnant.

Chances are, there's a new public course opening somewhere near your existing public course and there isn't a bumper crop of new players in the area. That existing core has a choice.

Now, what do you do?

Renovation has been the path many courses have taken to lure new players and maintain the interest of course faithful. Remounding to make a course more "playable," moving tee boxes and replanting greens rank among some of the standard renovations. New courses come complete with a lot of bells and whistles to lure players; older courses can breath new life into their classic stylings to do the same.

Some courses are increasing their marketing efforts in their areas, while others plan to convert the occasional players through player development/learning centers. This move makes good, sound sense. Think of all those "echo boomers," or children of the "baby boomers," who will be hitting their mature years at the turn of the century. Attaching a learning center can improve player retention while attracting beginners and women — markets golf has to tap into.

And if you're not willing to make one of these changes, there's always the "banana suit" method. A recent news report told the story of a public course owner who, in an effort to lure players, dressed in a banana suit and handed out fruit at the 10th tee.

Renovation and player development are just two of the topics Public Golf Forum will cover — smart, thoughtful alternatives to donning the banana suit.



Michael Levans,  
editor

## The 'Tiger Factor' is keeping the entire industry busy

Has Tiger Woods spawned a new niche in the golf course industry?

It seems that some forward-thinking golf courses are expanding viewing areas when Tiger comes to town. Just as the thousands of greens- and bunker-renovation projects around the country have spawned new profit-making, so too could this phenomena, if it continues.

Think of it. Who could reap windfall from expansions of viewing areas? Golf course designers, large earth-movers, shapers, turfgrass seed and sod companies, micronutrient and fertilizer suppliers and, later on, chemical firms... The list goes on. And, where turf is not involved, bleacher manufacturers and others.

Everyone is looking for a niche if they don't already have one. Are there any wannabe "turnkey spectator-expansion experts" out there?

The moderate crowds at PGA Tour events of the recent past have ballooned by two or three times — from 10,000 to 20,000 to 30,000 fans — when Tiger plays. Did you get tingles — and memories of Arnie and his Army — when the young man strode up the 18th fairway a month ago to claim his fourth victory of the year, and a mass of humanity trailed him, cheering all the way?

Either fortunate or foresighted, Firestone has been hard at work in preparation for the NEC World Series of Golf. Course architect Craig Schreiner (see Q&A, page 33) is adding gallery space on the 1st tee and tripling the spectator area on the 18th hole. Space around the 16th is also targeted in the plan as well as more "skybox" areas for execs.

"No question, Tiger will draw larger crowds," said Shreiner. "Firestone is well suited for him."

So, also, is the golf course construction industry, it appears.

Are sand bunkers hazards or not? With all the attention on firmness and being able to play out of them, they sometimes lose their reason for existence: to penalize errant shots.

As golf course architect Marvin Armstrong said: "At this rate, at some point in the future they will ask us to remove the water from water hazards."

It seems somewhat appropriate that Widow's Walk Golf Course in Scituate, Mass., (see cover story) sits almost equidistantly between the two most famous links courses in the world: St. Andrews in Scotland and Pebble Beach, Calif.

On the cart path along the 17th hole and between the 3rd green and 4th tee, markers state: St. Andrews — 3,136 miles; and Pebble Beach — 3,152 miles.

An abandoned gravel pit now teeming with wildlife (and a handful of each golfer's golf balls), Widow's Walk may carve out its own territory of fame.



Mark Leslie,  
managing editor

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GOLF COURSE NEWS

## Letter

### YAMAHA MAKES CLEAR ITS SPONSORSHIP ROLE

I want to commend you on your fine publication, and at the same time respond to your recent article on suppliers to the golf industry participating in national golf tournament sponsorships.

I am sure that each of the major suppliers that you addressed has their own strategic agenda, and I would like to address ours at Yamaha Golf Cars, USA, and the Energizer Senior Tour Championship, sponsored by Yamaha Golf Cars.

The article and subsequent editorial were great for exposure, and I am sure that the questions raised were shared by many in the industry. Frankly, the issues of the perceived value of the exposure and television advertising, value of consumer-oriented advertising time, for business-to-business products, and weight of where the dollars may have been spent with more value, were

all areas that were heavily evaluated within the management of Yamaha.

However, it will surprise you to know that these debates were not lengthy, as they were not critical to our decision process. We made the decision to commit serious dollars to this tournament based on the solid Yamaha corporate foundation of business partnerships and mutually beneficial relationships. This national tournament, and only this national tournament, offered an opportunity to build on this foundation.

The Energizer Senior Tour Championship sponsored by Yamaha Golf Cars, will soon move to a new TPC facility in Myrtle Beach. This will be a truly unique situation in that the facility will be jointly owned by Myrtle Beach Golf Holiday (Myrtle Beach Golf and Hotel Owners) and the Tour. Imagine, a new TPC course owned by the local golf course owners

and the tour. In addition, a nationally televised championship which, like almost all tournaments, needs additional financial support.

Now our primary strategy is probably more clear to all those questioning our motives, or direction. We are now, and for the years to come, business partners with Myrtle Beach Golf Holiday. This is undeniably one of the top destination golf markets in the country today and is also where our current market share is not where we would like it to be.

Our sponsorship is about this business relationship with these owners, and the opportunities that our financial commitment to their success, will offer us in the future. It was our partnership with the National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA) that led our two organizations to meet.

We view this new relationship as a natural progression of our national program with the NGCOA. This unprecedented partnership with owners from around the country

resulted in over 6,000 new golf cars in 1996 alone, via the NGCOA "Smart Buy" program.

We at Yamaha view golf course owners, and their growing strength as a group, as a key segment in our future growth. We have demonstrated our commitment financially. In return, we have been blessed with many opportunities to present Yamaha quality to those previously unreceptive. This has resulted in stronger incremental sales, more sales of electric cars, and most importantly, relationships and partnerships, areas that are critical to Yamaha's growth in the years ahead.

We do not see ourselves as new players in the national tournament business, but as a quality golf car supplier continuing to build partnerships with golf course owners.

Michael Muetzel  
National Sales Manager  
Yamaha Golf Car Group, USA