

New group fights for the right to walk

By J. BARRY MOTHES

WASHINGTON, D.C. — It's a classic golf story for these times. A story with legs.

Graham Whatley, a former Clinton administration appointee now working as a consultant, has launched the Walking Golfer's Association to promote and advocate the rights of golfers who

prefer to walk while they play. The non-profit association will fight to keep walking an essential part of the game of golf.

"This is political movement in the golf world," said Whatley, a 39-year-old attorney who plays to a 12 handicap — while walking — at his local course, the Redgate Municipal Golf Course

in Rockville, Md. "We're quite serious about this."

The idea of a walking golfer's association would have seemed ridiculous 30 or 40 years ago — and might still seem so in most parts of the world where walking golfers dominate. But golf in the United States in the late 1990s is another matter. The

industry's heavy reliance of golf cart rentals to increase golf course revenues and the growing number of golf courses in the United States that force golfers to rent and ride carts has led to a grass-roots resentment among those who prefer to walk when they play golf.

Whatley decided to launch the Walking Golfer's Association after running into a situation that

has become commonplace in the last 10 or so years — mandatory carts and cart fees, especially at the increasing number of high-end, "upscale," daily-fee courses. "There's nothing worse than being forced to take a cart," said Whatley.

Whatley and his partner in the venture, Keith Pickford, are currently working to enlist people from different areas of the game to serve on the WGA's Board of Directors. One of the first to sign on is golf course architect Dr. Michael Hurdzan.

"I really think walking a golf course is an essential part of golf," said Hurdzan, who grew up caddying, then later became superintendent at a public course in Columbus, Ohio, where walking was a natural part of the game.

"I think the game is more enjoyable when you walk, with the fairway under your feet, the jangling of the clubs, the conversation with the people you're playing with. We've become addicted to golf cars and financially dependent on golf cars. I'm really bothered when people say the only way to run a profitable golf course is to rent golf cars. Golf is too great a game to be hostage to anything."

According to Whatley, the new Walking Golfer's Association has three short-term goals:

- work for revisions in the official rules of golf to include wording that states every golfer has the right to walk his or her round of golf. This proposed change would probably be targeted for Rule 1-1, which states, "The Game of Golf consists in playing a ball from a teeing ground into the hole by a stroke or successive strokes in accordance with the Rules." Whatley would like to see another sentence or two along the lines of, "walking is an integral part of the game of golf and no golfer should be denied the right to walk ..."

"This would codify something that has been assumed about golf since the beginning of time," said Whatley. "It's so assumptive, it's not even in the rules."

- provide advocacy services to its members by writing letters and sending informational packets to golf courses that restrict or ban walking to encourage them to allow walking.

- create a web-site and a working directory of golf courses that allow walking.

The WGA will also work to educate the golfing community on the benefits of walking, such as physical health, social interaction, and speed of play. Whatley pointed out that in Britain, a typical round of golf played by four walking golfers each playing their own ball takes about 3

Continued on next page

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Family Golf purchases six golf properties in Midwest, Southeast

MELVILLE, N.Y.—Family Golf Center, Inc. has acquired the rights to six additional golf properties, has purchased the Icelands Skating and Family Entertainment Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, and acquired Confidence Golf, a manufacturer of custom golf clubs.

The company entered into a merger agreement with Blue Eagle Golf Centers to acquire all the assets of that company, which consists of two owned locations: Champions Golf Center in Kansas

City, Kan., and Sports World in Wichita, Kan., and a leased property, Golf 76, in Stuart, Fla.

The agreement with Blue Eagle, which is subject to various conditions, would mark Family Golf's first entry in the state of Kansas. Two additional golf properties acquired are Cantera Golf Center in Warrenville, Ill.,

and Laguna Creek Golf Center in Elk Grove, Calif., both of which are under long-term lease agreements. Another center will be constructed on leased property in Douglas County, Denver on County Line Road and will complement Family Golf's growing presence in that city.

The company also announced

the acquisition of Confidence Golf located in Palm Desert, CA. Confidence has manufactured custom golf clubs since 1966. Family Golf, which retails golf equipment in its 57 pro shops across the country, will use Confidence to manufacture and distribute a full line of golf clubs, bags and other accessories.

EXPANSION PLANNED FOR NY TRACK

AMENIA, N.Y.—Island Green Country Club plans a multi-million-dollar, nine-hole expansion project. Others plans include a new clubhouse, hotel, lodge and conference center. Construction could start this spring.

Walkers' group


Continued from previous page

1/2 hours. Foursome matches, with two teams of two golfers alternating shots on one ball, are often played in two hours. Whatley wants to develop a series of videos that would show golfers how the existing rules of golf can help speed up the rate of play. He lists the five-minute limit on looking for a lost ball and the playing of a provisional ball as two simple rules that many golfers don't know. He'd also like to see the average non-competitive golfer get away from time-consuming habits like marking their ball after every putt on a green.

The main target of the association will be the growing number of high-end daily-fee courses that require golfers to take carts at all times or during peak hours. Whatley said a first positive step would be for these courses to allow golfers who prefer to walk the option of walking but paying for the cart fee. Whatley said other options include requiring golfers to take motorized pull caddies that would still allow them to walk. The ideal, he said, would be for courses to allow walking and not charge an additional cart fee for a privilege that has been considered the essence of the game for centuries.

The United States Golf Association has a walking section dedicated to the subject of walking in golf. But Whatley said he has not been overly impressed with its efforts. "They've been around more than two years," he said, "and they've got 12,000 members ... and it's free. Give me a break. They're not even doing any promoting. I called the USGA and the woman who answered the phone didn't even know they had a walking section."

Whatley also said the trend of mandatory cart use at public-access golf courses in the United States has other troubling implications for the future of the game. "If you're forcing everyone to go out in a cart," he said, "You're restricting the chances for youth and minority golfers to get on the golf course."



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