

Ranges, practice facilities pioneer advanced new era

By BOB SPIWAK

If you believe golf originated with Scottish shepherds whacking rocks into rabbit holes with their crooks, it makes sense to assume that driving ranges began earlier. Before the rabbit "scrapes" were considered targets, the herders probably hit the rocks in no particular direction.

How things have changed.

The range of today runs the gamut from a primitive field with (perhaps) yard markers, through facilities like that in

1ST OF 2 PARTS

the movie "Tin Cup" to multi-tiered techno-

logical marvels which are heated in winter, or cooled and misted in hot climates. For a constant climate, there are immense air-supported domes.

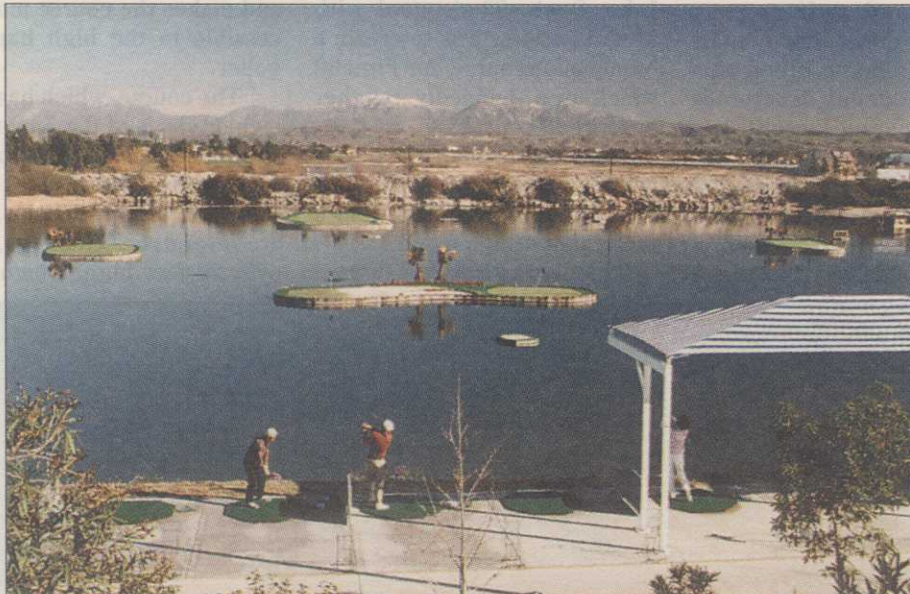
The facilities have a variety of automated features such as automatic ball washers and dispensers that place the ball on the tee for the golfer. There are a few which, from the time the new balls are unloaded, they are never again touched by human hands until time for discard.

There are aqua ranges where the targets float in the water as do the balls. One of these, The Islands Golf Center in Anaheim, was noted Top Driving Range in California and third best in the nation by *Sports Illustrated*.

Most operators prefer a more accurate name for their facilities and justifiably: They are not merely for hitting balls anymore. There are golf centers, which along with the range, offer instruction, chipping areas, bunkers, putting greens, putting courses and even full-sized, par-3 and regulation courses as part of the facility. Others, some called Family Entertainment Centers, offer everything from batting cages to Go-Kart tracks to augment the golf facilities. And, when the golf or other entertainment is over, some feature restaurants to entice the family to stay a little longer.

Like golf courses, range ownership covers the spectrum from private ownership to giant corporations with chains of facilities around the country or world. In a study conducted by The National Golf Foundation comparing the period 1994 to 1998, the upscaling of these venues is clear. Installation of a retail shop was up 20 percent, club repair 22 percent and club rentals nearly doubled. There were 20-percent jumps in practice putting greens and short-game practice areas. Teaching professionals on staff increased from 34 to 60 percent in that four-year period.

The name Hank Haney is known to most golfers as one of the shining stars among golf teachers. Haney owns three facilities in the Dallas area. "Teaching," says Haney, "is kind of our big thing." At his McKinney, Texas, facility, for example, 10 instructors are on staff. "Our



Practicing their distance, or settling a bet, golfers have islands as targets at The Islands Golf Center in Anaheim, Calif.



A three-deck practice center packs in golfers at The Golf Center in Des Plaines, Ill.

pros just teach, and that alone is going to make it better than at a golf club. They don't have to wear as many hats as a club professional," Haney says. "There's not a golf course that has practice facilities as good as ours."

Two of his three ranges have nine-hole courses, and after or during lessons, students can take their education from the tee line to actual playing conditions and be monitored by the instructor.

The industry has grown to the extent that it has its own association, The Golf Range Association of America (GRAA). Founder and Executive Director Steve di Costanzo started the organization in 1992 and soon after began publication of *Golf Range & Recreation Report* magazine. ("Recreation" was dropped from the name in 1998.)

di Costanzo was working for a Japanese-American magazine when he met a man who owned one of Japan's largest multi-tiered ranges. This person expressed surprise that few mega-ranges were being built in the United States. di Costanzo saw the opportunity and in 1991 took a sample range newsletter to the PGA Merchandise Show, concentrating on exhibitors associated with ranges. At this time most ranges were privately operated, although the future was being ushered in in the New York area where the first bi-level ranges were coming on line.

His newsletter well received, di Costanzo left his job and formed GRAA with its companion 16-page newsletter. At the end of the first year, 100 ranges

belonged to the association. Now, six years later there are over 700 worldwide.

Asked about the growing number of members and success of the range business, GRAA vice president Mark Silverman asserts: "It's really not about

golf, it's about land. The land is being banked and a range is the best income producer for the property at a given time." Silverman cited a range operator to whom he spoke on this subject.

"The range was prosperous, so I asked him what he would do if IBM came in to build a plant and made him an offer. He told me he'd have the place emptied in three hours."

Be that as it may, ranges throughout the nation and around the world are growing in number, size, in modern conveniences and increased creature comfort and service to their patrons. This, in turn, has spawned support industries; individual club makers to massive ball delivery systems, a variety of methods to heat the tee line (and expand the season) and the opposite, which cool the lines in the desert.

Balls by the thousands or dozens are used and later discarded. The largest-selling shirts in ranges around the country are made by Ashworth. At one, they cannot keep Nike merchandise on the shelves.

Ranges have gone upscale. There were no Big Berthas to rent at Tin Cup.

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