

Practice ranges: Varied, challenging future

By BOB SPIWAK

Eyeing the possibilities of millions of Americans who say they want to play more golf, National Golf Foundation President and CEO Joe Beditz feels that "enhancing the golf experience on the golf course or at the range is most important, because [these] are where first impressions about the game are formed."

Forty million Americans want to play more golf or take up the game, Beditz said, adding: "If

"How can a mom-and-pop operation like ours compete with the big boys on the other side of town?"

He well may have been speaking of the biggest of those boys, the dynamic Dominic Chang, chairman of Family Golf Centers, Inc. FGCI has followed the merger-and-acquisition path to

become the largest multisite operator of stand-alone facilities in the industry, according to di Costanzo.

Having acquired many smaller companies and merged with heavyweight Metro Golf, FGCI went on to absorb Eaglequest Golf Centers, a Canadian-based

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Training up youths is a key to success for practice facilities of all stripes.

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over the next 10 to 12 years we're able to tap into just 20 percent of the latent demand ... we could see the total number of golfers increase from 26 to 32 million."

Research by the Golf Range Association of America (GRAA) shows that stand-alone range development has had a continuing slowdown since 1993, a year after the tabulation began. While since that year the number of ranges has almost doubled — from 1,406 to 2,241 — the annual rate of growth has slowed from 12.9 percent in 1992-93 to 3.4 percent in 1997-98.

Does this bode ill for Beditz' scenario?

Not so, according to Steven di Costanzo, founder and president of GRAA. "Barriers have risen," he said. "And it is getting tougher to start up a new facility. Land costs, location (or lack thereof) and other factors have made startup [of new facilities] more difficult.

"On the other hand, competition has put more and better ranges out there. Ranges already in place have renovated, updated and done a better job of catering to the customers."

Di Costanzo sees this upgrading and rehabilitating as offering more creature comforts and a wider variety of golf-related activities than merely a tee line from which balls are hit. Target greens, putting and chipping areas, heated and cooled tee stations, good food. The list goes on.

Many in the industry believe ranges will, in fact, become "Learning Centers." More and more are offering professional instruction from not one person but an entire staff of teaching pros.

Short courses, from three to nine holes are becoming more common, shoulder to shoulder with the traditional tee line. If this comprehensive approach takes hold, it will be the first step on the road to golfdom for many of Beditz' millions of new golfers.

Asked one range operator, wishing to remain anonymous,



We never said you wouldn't see unattractive spots on your course. They just won't be dollar spots.



Even simple facilities, throwbacks to long-ago days, should attract practicing golfers.

Ranges of future

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outfit with 18 facilities. Then it spent a reported \$31 million for the 14 facilities of financially troubled Golden Bear Golf.

Currently, FGCI owns or operates 116 golf centers.

Does this mean that small facilities will become extinct? Probably not. While metropolitan areas are the domain for

mega centers and deep-pocketed owners, there is still pent-up demand for practice and learning facilities in less-settled areas, those whose demographics preclude any major investment.

A case in point is Okanogan County in Washington. It is the largest county in the state, with a land mass greater than Connecticut and Rhode Island, and has only five golf courses, only one with 18 holes.

There is but one range and this is usually on "The Honor System."

Places such as this exist throughout the nation, and make do with what they have because golfers want to have someplace to practice. While facilities may be in short supply, the number of golfers continues to grow, be it in Orlando or Okanogan.

"The mission of golf ranges over the next decade is to help the growth of the game of golf," said di Costanzo. "They are there to groom the next generation of golfers. [What will be required] is an affordable full-service experience to all strata of golfers. I see more [ranges] giving instruction, more club fitting and retailing. I see more social events like leagues being formed with game concepts and competitive events."

He sees FGCI as the dominant golf center corporation now, but added: "...the door is open for others, the precedent has been set. Corporate players we don't even know of at this time may be there in a couple of years and will be opening new doors."

While the number of newly opened facilities is shrinking, they are still appearing annually. With these and as current sites are being upgraded and expanded, exciting changes are here now and more are coming.

Golf domes are doing well in Northern states, with the siren call: Bring your sticks and leave winter outside the door.

More domes will be coming in the next decade. Ball delivery systems will become more automated and efficient, ultimately being untouched by human hands until disposal time. Advances in heating and cooling will provide climatic comfort on outdoor ranges.

More tee lines will feature grass rather than mats, and even the latter will improve in quality and reality.

Where land is scarce, more multitiered ranges will appear. Advances in net technology will make "Vest-pocket" facilities available in small land areas or on rooftops.

While the days of the mowed hay field range are far from over, center stage is being taken by the new marvels of the 21st century.

Once stigmatized, ranges have become respectable places to hit balls, get instruction not only on the mechanics, but the history, traditions and etiquette of the game.

Call them ranges, centers or learning facilities, they are the training grounds for tomorrow's Tour stars and club champions. More important, they are the entre for millions of everyday golfers.



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