

Still a challenge

JUST LIKE THE LARGER ONES, NINE-HOLE FACILITIES STRUGGLE TO MAINTAIN BUSINESS AND INCREASE THE NUMBER OF ROUNDS

by
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Is short good in golf? When it comes to hitting your driver it's not. But what about course length and the time it takes to play a round?

One of the reasons for the trend of declining rounds in various markets throughout the country is that many people don't want to spend the hours needed to play the game.

"It's hard to devote five hours to something," says Peter Grass, CGCS, of the nine-hole Hilands Golf Club in Billings, Mont.

This might lead one to think nine-hole golf courses would have an advantage over larger facilities because of the perception they take less time to play (even though one could play nine holes at an 18-hole or larger facility). However, they're having just as much difficulty maintaining busi-

ness and increasing the number of rounds generated.

Course characteristics

Hilands is a bit different from other courses because it doesn't depend on a certain number of rounds, Grass says.

"We're private and don't operate on cash," he says. "If we depended just on the cash register, we wouldn't have the conditions we do. Our niche is upper end. Rounds aren't essential to us. Play in our area is down a bit, but we're holding our own."

The 275-member club features a course that isn't stereotypical, according to Grass, who has been at Hilands for 30 years. The town was built up around the 80-year old course, so there's no room to expand. And because the course is located three or four

minutes from downtown it's convenient for many golfers.

"But it's never so packed that you can't just show up and play within 15 minutes," Grass says. "There's not a lot of guest play."

The club's membership lost 30 members three years ago, and the golf course maintenance budget was tight, according to Grass, whose maintenance budget including labor is \$220,000 this year. The initiation fee was \$7,500 before it was lowered to \$2,500 to generate interest. Thanks to renewed interest, the initiation fee climbed to \$4,000. Annual dues are \$2,200.

"Being private is more comforting," he says. "The best benefit of being a private course is control over the rules and being able to educate members better and teach proper etiquette. People in this area are more



Being a nine-hole facility, Downers Grove Golf Club in Illinois is busier during the week than the weekend. Photo: Bernie Bak



Geneva Golf Club is undergoing a \$1.8-million capital improvement project that includes bunker and tee renovation. Photo: Geneva Golf Club.

relaxed and aren't so quick on the trigger to fire someone at the sight of a problem on the golf course."

The 106-year-old Geneva Golf Club in Illinois also is landlocked. The private nine-hole facility 40 miles west of Chicago sits on 40 acres of land. The 165-member club – 90 of which have equity in it – has been stable, according to Ed Braunsky, CGCS, who has been at Geneva 26 years. The course generates between 7,000 and 8,000 rounds annually. In 2004, the course generated 6,700 rounds, and in 2005 generated almost 7,000. Braunsky, who has a maintenance budget of \$193,000 and a capital expenditure budget of \$35,000, says time constraint is an issue with many golfers.

"Time is money," he says. "We're right

includes renovating bunkers and tees, which is estimated to cost \$300,000. Golf course architect David Esler is trying to return to old-style bunkering with jagged edges, Braunsky says. Also, fescue moundings will be installed to get away from the runway look.

"Primarily, golfers feel a course has to be 18 holes, and that's why the renovation is important," Braunsky says. "We hadn't done bunkers since the late 1980s."

After the renovation, the 2,900-yard course will be a par 34 with a slope rating of 132.

In addition to the bunkers and tees, the clubhouse and the pool will be renovated. The pool renovation is estimated to cost between \$700,000 and \$800,000.

a bit from \$1.1 million in 2002-03 to \$1 million last year. The course was generating 50,000 rounds in 1998, and now is generating 46,000 rounds. However, the maintenance budget hasn't been cut too much, according to Pozen.

Yet Downers Grove isn't generating more rounds because of its size, unfortunately, Pozen says. Through mid-July, rounds declined 4 percent year over year, which is equivalent to 1,000 rounds, but the driving range business has increased 3 percent, according to Vann Bennett, golf course manager, who has been there for 4.5 years. Bennett says the performance of Downers Grove is in step with the trend that people don't or aren't willing to devote 2.5 hours or more to a round of golf.

Despite the decline of the number of rounds, Downers Grove generates steady business during the week.

"People like to play 18 holes on the weekends," says Pozen, whose staff consists of two full-time workers and six seasonal workers. "Here, it's a different mentality. We get more business during the week – Monday through Thursday – compared to the weekend. We generate more rounds than others during the week."

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near the metro station, so golfers can get the train home and squeeze in a round of golf."

Like Grass, Braunsky says being private has its advantages.

"Members can come tee it up and go," he says. "There are no tee times, and we don't have a waiting issue or have log jams. The members know who plays when."

Currently, Geneva is undergoing a \$1.8-million capital improvement project that

Another landlocked, nine-hole course that's trying to differentiate itself in a competitive market is the public Downers Grove Golf Club in Illinois. Built in 1892, Downers Grove was the original Chicago Golf Club, which moved to Wheaton, Ill., in 1899. Rounds and revenue have declined at Downers Grove since 2001, according to golf course superintendent Jeff Pozen. Net revenue declined from \$300,000 in 2001 to \$110,000 last year. Gross revenue declined

What's your condition?

Market conditions vary throughout the country, but they all have an effect on each golf facility. Grass says there's a lot of golf available in the greater Billings area – not a glut, but plenty of holes. He says Hilands is the only nine-hole course in the vicinity. Other courses in the area are: an 18-hole, par-3 city-owned course; three 18-hole

public-play courses; three 18-hole private courses and one 27-hole, soon-to-be 36-hole private course. All these are within a 13-mile radius of the city. Many golfers will travel 40 to 80 miles to play golf courses in smaller towns, Grass says. The Yellowstone Country Club, which is full according to Grass, is considered to be Hilands direct competitor for members.

"We're not hurting, but we're not full," he says. "If this was a public course, we wouldn't be as stable."

In the Chicago area, many courses are renovating and trying to keep up with the other courses in the area, according to Braunsky, who is the only full-time maintenance employee at Geneva and has as many as 14 seasonal workers.

"Golfers are staying closer to home, and we're an in-town club," he says.

On Tuesday nights, Geneva hosts an event where golfers play seven holes and socialize afterwards.

Like Geneva and Hilands, Downers Grove is in a competitive market. There are three executive courses and one par-3 course within a seven-mile radius, as well as 15 larger courses within a 10-mile radius – all of which are public.

"When you have that type of competition, you work harder to stand out," Bennett says. "If you don't have that competition, people come to you because they have no choice, and you don't want to do business like that."

A few ways Downers Grove tries to stand out is by setting up additional tees 150 to 175 yards from the green for kids and families. Bennett also is selling punch cards and buckets of balls at the range so people who buy in bulk receive a discount. He would rather do that than just slash prices. Green fees range from \$12.50 during the week to \$18.50 on weekends.

Negative perceptions

Nine-hole courses are not only having a difficult time growing their businesses compared to larger facilities, but they sometimes are viewed negatively by golfers because of their size.

"We hold our maintenance standards as high as any 18-hole course," Grass says. "The tide is changing. Seven or eight years ago, I served on a GCSAA committee and was 'the nine-hole guy.' I got ribbed and said, 'I'm nine-holes, and I'm OK with that.' Years ago, the perception was that a nine-hole course was a lesser cousin to an 18-hole golf course. But there are more nine-hole courses out here in Wyoming and Montana than 18-hole courses."



Hilands Golf Club isn't hurting, but it isn't full, according to Peter Grass, CGCS, who says that if the course was public, it wouldn't be as stable as it is. Photo: Hilands Golf Club

Grass says he has half the headaches with a nine-hole course compared to an 18-hole course.

"We do the same things on a nine-hole course that are done on an 18-hole course or larger, just less," he says. "The knowledge level is equal to that of superintendents on 18-hole courses. You still need the same skills whether you're caring for one hole or 27."

Naturally, the staff at Hilands is small. There are three full-time golf course maintenance employees: an equipment manager, assistant superintendent and Grass.

"I mow greens myself," Grass says. "I'm more hands-on. Half the time is administrative work, and the other half is out on the course. As the superintendent of a nine-hole course, you need to be a jack of all trades."

Pozen says course size all equals out.

"It's all a matter of scale," he says. "Nine-hole courses have less area. We have one fairway mower and one greens mower. But it's the same amount of hours and time as working on an 18-hole course."

Some golfers in the Chicago area have the perception that Downers Grove is an executive or par-3 course instead of the regulation nine-hole course that it is, Bennett says. That perception can be negative, but Bennett says he hasn't done much specifically to combat that perception. He says some locals still don't even know the 114-year-old course exists.

"We need to get people out here on the golf course so they can learn about its history and spread the word," he says. GCN



In the Chicago area, many golf courses are renovating to keep up with neighboring courses. The Geneva Golf Club is one of them. Photo: Geneva Golf Club