

Weather: Freezing; Golf: Fine

By installing infra-red heaters at the driving range tees, club managers can boost winter traffic. Golden Tee Golf Center did by 65 per cent

AS soon as cold, damp or freezing weather descends, operators of golf courses and driving ranges might as well close down. The lines of fair-weather golfers waiting to tee off or practice on the driving range melts away as the mercury drops, and it is a lucky operator who can meet expenses, let alone show a profit, once the season is over.

Not so at Golden Tee Golf Center in the Cincinnati suburb of Sharonville. Manager and head professional Tom Ritter keeps it open and comfortable year-round. Twenty gas-fueled infra-red heaters create individual comfortable zones in each of the aluminum-partitioned tee stalls, where they are mounted nine feet overhead at a 30-degree angle.

The radiant energy of these units, is available within a few moments. The heater's ceramic element glows cherry red, and infra-red energy is directed downward in a controlled path by the shaped reflector built into the unit. This energy, directly absorbed by surfaces in its path, makes them warm regardless of air temperature and keeps concrete floors, carpet mats and everything in the tee position—including the golfer—dry. It even prevents buildup of ice or snow. Additionally, as the floor and walls are warmed, they give off by convection, secondary radiation that helps warm the surrounding air. The aluminum wall partitions also reflect a significant amount of heat so that golfers can practice their drives in shirt-sleeves when temperatures are below freezing.

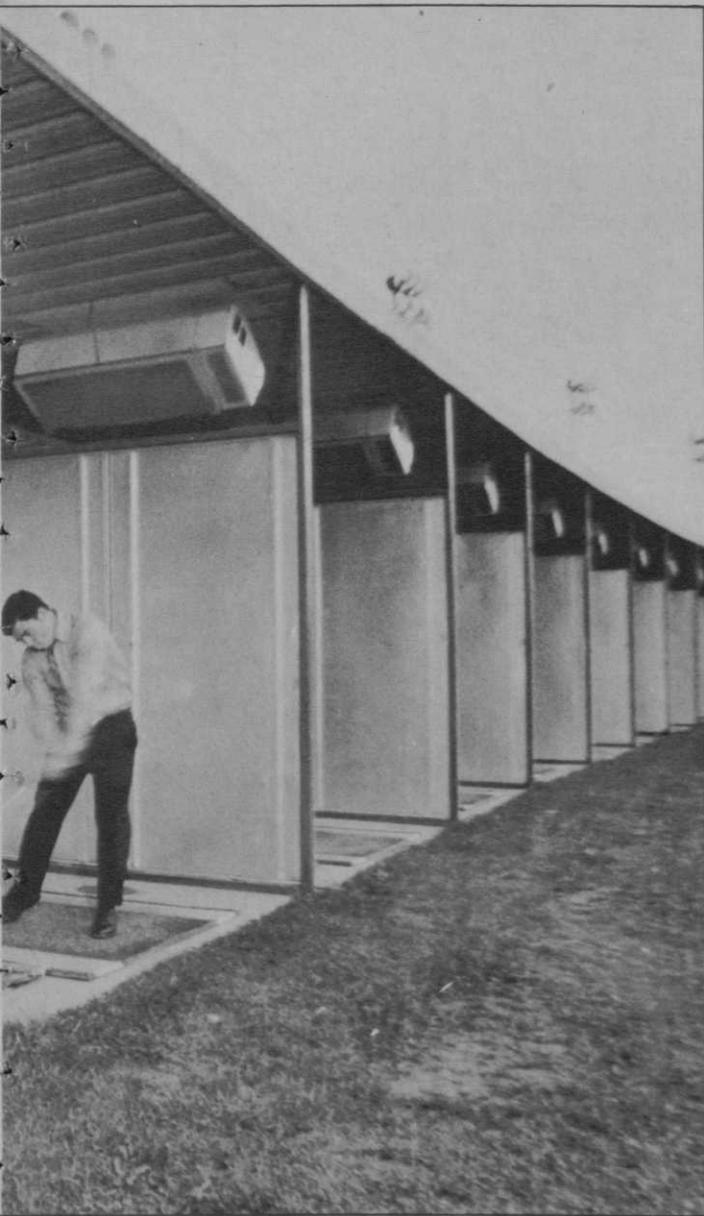
The effect of this increased comfort on Golden Tee's winter business has been "nothing short of phenomenal," reports Ritter. Not only is traffic on the driving range tees up by an average of 65 to 70 per cent over previous levels, but substantial off-season business has been directed to the pro shop.

Because it is located close to two motels, the center is ideally situated to attract transient businessmen and executives. But no matter how well designed and inviting a facility looks, it only earns a profit when it is being



used. Extending the use of Golden Tee to include the maximum possible number of people over the maximum possible number of days was Ritter's primary objective in specifying the gas-fueled heaters.

Normally the Cincinnati area has relatively mild winters, but there are from 40 to 50 days each season when dampness, chill, freezing rain or snow makes the driving range unplayable without some form of supplemental heat. The revenue loss as a result of a forced closing on



any given day can vary from \$250 to as much as \$1,000 depending on the number of golfers who want to practice. Naturally, Ritter intends to keep his driving range as busy as demand warrants, so heating was a logical addition to the snack bar, pro shop and other comforts provided for golfers.

The first attempt at heating Golden Tee's practice stalls, however, was a failure. Damp weather compounded the problems experienced with electric radiant heaters,

and the results affected both performance and reliability. Even when operating, these heaters did not produce a level of warmth to insure customer comfort. Their installation required heavy cables and insulation, adding to initial costs, and energy costs were "out of proportion to the benefits derived," according to the management of Golden Tee.

A tour of other installations where natural gas infra-red heaters were doing an effective job at realistic costs soon convinced Ritter that there was nothing impractical about the idea of off-season heating for his range's practice tees. It was only a matter of choosing the right equipment and energy source.

A pilot installation of five heaters began in the fall of 1968, and Golden Tee's management agreed to try them on a "money back if not satisfied" basis. The pilot installation proved so popular in its first season that it was immediately expanded to 10 units, with another 10 added two weeks later. Golfers soon learned that the infra-red heaters could keep them comfortable in any weather. Ritter's off-season business boomed as the word spread. Golden Tee was the first golf center in the Cincinnati area to offer the heated driving range tees, and the competitive edge this produced will take a long time to wear off, predicts the head pro.

Actual operating cost of the infra-red heaters is calculated at an average of just under three cents per unit hour, based on the local utility's volume commercial rate. Compared to the electric heaters originally used, this is less than 20 per cent of the hourly operating cost. Moreover, with natural gas, Golden Tee pays only for the actual amount of energy used. There is never a penalty demand charge for consumption over a specified amount. Maintenance expense for the heaters is minimal: a seasonal cleaning normally is enough.

To protect the heaters against unnecessary exposure and possible vandalism, they are installed on demountable frames with simple connections to the permanent gas lines. When weather turns mild, the heaters can be taken down in a few hours and stored.

Encouraging the practice of golf as a year-round sport not only makes Golden Tee's customers more proficient, but also keeps the cash register busy. "Making our patrons comfortable pays off in extra sales all round," concludes Ritter, "and we credit natural gas infra-red heating with a major share in our off-season success." □