

Night was falling when the golfer completed his 9th and final hole. Too bad. He was just finding his groove. "I sure wish I could play some more," he said, disappointed the dark ended his stellar round.

Dean Wilson and his father, Charles, were within earshot of the golfer's remark. The Wilsons, owners of the course the man was playing, turn and gazed at each other with silver-dollar-sized eyes when they heard the man speak. Father and son shared the same notion.

"We oughta light this course up," Charles said, as Dean nodded in approval.

About a year later, Hillcrest GC, located near Houston in Alvin, Texas, was lit up like the Las Vegas strip. The course was equipped with 34-foot-tall light posts from tee to green on each of its nine holes. And, as the Wilsons expected, business began bustling at moonrise.

That was 1994 and nothing has changed, except that night golf is as popular as a pinch of tobacco between the cheek and gum in Houston. Dean says competitors have opened five lighted, par-3 courses in the area since Hillcrest upped its electric usage.

"Right now it's 3 p.m., and I'm looking at an empty parking lot," Dean said. "But at 6:30 p.m., this place will be packed."

Hillcrest is jammed most nights until about 10 p.m., Dean says. The last golfer might walk off the course at 1 a.m.

"Our business has increased dramatically," Dean says.

While he refuses to reveal exact sales numbers, Dean did disclose that night golf at Hillcrest boosted profits enough that the family business could afford to build a new, 18-hole, par-72 layout — lighted, of course. The front nine opened in July 1996, the back nine in November 1997.

Dean says Beacon Lakes GC, located about 20 minutes from downtown Houston, takes its name from a Bible passage. "Beacon" means light, according to the Big Book.

Dean says golfers love playing at night for various reasons. There are benefits year-round.

Have you ever tried to tee it up on a sizzling July afternoon in Texas? We're talking melting.

Golf Course Owner Sees the Light

BY LARRY AYLWARD



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For that reason, folks would rather wait until the temperature drops to 90 in the early evening to take to the links.

In the winter, night golf is a godsend for bored working stiff, who normally head to the bar for beers and Birdie King after the bell rings because it's too dark to play the real deal.

"Our market picks up during the winter because we're drawing from a bigger customer base," Dean says, noting that competition for golfers is limited in the winter, especially if you have a lighted course.

Dean won't say how much the family business paid to light Hillcrest and Beacon Lakes. Of course, the Wilsons paid a lot less because they installed the lights themselves.

"Let's just say it's a profitable venture," Dean adds.

Besides seeing the light, the Wilsons are also seeing green. Dean would like for the family business to take on a new role — consulting, as in here's how to install lights on your golf course.

"We didn't do all this work just to give away free information," Dean says. "If someone is interested, we'll consult for a fee."

What's that line about a free lunch?

Anyway, if you're looking to drum up new business, consider lights for nighttime play. And why not? It's time the golf industry catch up to the 21st century.

Did you know the first Major League baseball game played under the lights took place in 1947 at Boston's Fenway Park? Baseball owners lighted their stadiums because they discovered more people could attend games at night.

Finally, a half-century later, golf course owners are finding out that more players are eager to tee it up under starry skies. Better late.

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