



Is Your Course

Golf courses face new demands to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The good news is that courses should be able to manage the changes without too much difficulty

BY BRUCE ALLAR

After word came down last year that golf courses would face new demands to be in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a common first reaction was apprehension. Course owners and their superintendents worried that the updated ADA guidelines, announced in September 2002, would place costly burdens upon them. But the news so far should be an anxiety-reliever: Compliance may turn out to be neither difficult nor expensive.

Take it from Sam Samuelson, the certified superintendent who maintains the Haggin Oaks Golf Complex, a 36-hole city-owned complex in Sacramento, Calif. The courses,

including an Alister MacKenzie championship-length layout, have already implemented accessibility programs to all parts of the courses for disabled players.

"The funny thing about all this is that so many superintendents are scared about what they'll have to do to comply with the ADA and, to be honest, it's hardly changed anything for us," Samuelson says. "The biggest problem superintendents have is fear. Once you get over that fear factor, it really doesn't affect you."

Haggin Oaks' MacKenzie course, which opened in 1932, was renovated in 2000. That's when the ADA specs were applied to make the course completely accessible. The other 18 holes (one nine opened in 1952 and the other in the early 1960s) are also called "accessible" by Haggin Oaks largely because the

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flat terrain in the area allows cars to get on and off tees easily. Also, tight curbing of cart paths was avoided, and bunkers were built with fairly flat entrance and exit points for disabled golfers, who generally hit the ball from moveable seats in their cars.

Five single-rider cars are available for disabled golfers who show up to play at Haggin Oaks. They are shuttled among the three courses as demand dictates.

Morton Golf, which operates the shop and teaching programs at the courses, also runs some programs for disabled golfers, according to Samuelson. As an added service, it's planning to print up a booklet marking any areas on the courses or throughout the Haggin Oaks' complex that might present accessibility problems for disabled players. The booklet would be distributed to disabled golfers when they register for rounds.

"The positives far outweigh the negatives," Samuelson says. "To see the smile on some of these faces when you give them accessibility — it's a wonderful thing."

Not all newly constructed or renovated courses must follow the Haggin Oaks lead, making nearly every playing area accessible to disabled golfers. While some of the details of compliance are yet to be worked out, early signs indicated that course architects and superintendents will be able to manage the changes without too much difficulty.

The rules

The U.S. Access Board, an independent federal agency devoted to accessibility for people with



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disabilities, issued its new guidelines, published in the *Federal Register* on Sept. 3, 2002, to "serve as the basis for standards to be adopted by the Department of Justice for new construction and alterations of recreational facilities covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act." The ADA was passed and signed into law in 1990. But the Access Board later took up modifications for several recreational categories including swimming pools and spas, boating facilities, amusement parks and, of course, golf courses.

Gary Robb, president of the National Al-

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At least 5 percent of practice tees on golf courses must be made accessible to disabled golfers, according to new guidelines.

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liance for Accessible Golf, headquartered at Indiana University in Bloomington, Ind., and affiliated with the National Center on Accessibility, helped spur modifications on golf courses.

"Golf was one of the major ones we started to champion, mostly because of my interest in and passion for the game," Robb says. "I've always thought it a game that can be inclusive for people with disabilities."

Robb says that golf course clubhouse areas, buildings and parking lots were covered by the original ADA when it was passed 13 years ago. The new standards apply to the courses themselves. He describes them as "pretty easy to comply with" and says they're designed to make golf

possible for persons with spinal cord injuries, muscular disorders and other disabilities.

"Individuals with mobility impairments have to be able to get on to fairways, tees and greens — basically so they can play the game like anybody else," Robb says. "It's pretty easy to design courses that way."

Key points

An advisory group to the Access Board began discussing guidelines for golf playing surfaces back in 1993. It took nearly 10 years for the recommendations to crawl through the bureaucracy. "They are still not legally enforceable standards until the Department of Justice turns them into regulations," Robb says.

He adds, however, that golf courses under construction or making modifications in the interim will likely be judged on their use of the "best available information" should they be challenged on their compliance, which is his way of recommending that the guidelines be followed from September 2002 forward.

The guidelines apply to new construction and any major alterations to existing courses such as new greens or adding a tee box. (A major alteration would be a total remake of an element on the golf course.) Any public course is affected, as are all private courses that open themselves to corporate outings or nonmember functions. Here are some key points:

- An accessible route, a minimum of 48-inches wide, must run throughout the golf course and also connect to the car rental area, bag drop, practice tees and greens, and other course amenities. The route need not be paved, but it must be "usable by golf cars." Regular cart paths can be part of the accessible route.

- For holes with two teeing areas, one must be accessible. For holes with three or more tee boxes, at least two must be usable by golfers in "mobility devices," which are often single-player cars. The forward teeing area must be accessible "regardless of the number of teeing grounds per hole." Disabled players must be able to drive their golf cars onto tees and hit their balls from the cars.

- Space must be provided for the mobility devices to enter and exit all greens. These special cars were determined to cause "little or no damage to the putting green surface," according to the Access Board report. But it did not spell out whether courses must allow the

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Single-rider cars, such as Club Car's 1-PASS, are a hot topic when it comes to accessible golf. Club Car says its vehicle causes no damage to greens, tees or other sensitive areas on the course.



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Disabled golfer Tom Houston has been crusading to promote accessible golf since 1989.

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devices onto the greens so players can putt from them. That decision has been left to the Justice Department, according to Robb.

■ At least 5 percent of practice tee areas must be accessible.

■ No additional requirements are involved for spectators with disabilities attending a tournament or competition on a course. However, golfing facilities hosting such play “must comply with all other requirements of the ADA,” which the guidelines describe as “the general obligation to provide an equal opportunity to individuals with disabilities to enjoy the services provided.”

If these measures worry you now, you should’ve attended the early meetings on the issue. Architect Dick Phelps of Phelps Golf Course Design in Evergreen, Colo., was a member of the advisory group for the Access Board in the mid-1990s. Advocates for the disabled were thinking players in hand-operated wheelchairs would be rolling themselves up and down fairways, on to greens and even into bunkers.

“When we first started on this thing, it was a whole lot more restrictive than it eventually boiled down to be,” Phelps recalls. “It was pretty scary.”

Early conversations broached the idea of making every inch of a course accessible. Suggestions included capping cart paths at a 5-percent grade, making all bunkers playable for wheelchair golfers and other difficult course revisions. “The irony was that several of the disabled golfers on the committee were more moderate in their opinions” than others, Phelps says.

On the final guidelines, Phelps adds, “I think they’re very fair, more fair than I thought we might have come up with.”

He sees potential problems in sandy or swampy areas, where golf car accessibility might be hard to achieve. But in most areas, he says, providing access will not be difficult with today’s earth-moving equipment. Single-rider cars — which are manufactured by several companies — have been tested on greens and found to apply no more pressure per square inch than the most popular mowers. “People walking on the green put down more foot-weight pressure than these things do,” says Samuelson of the cars.

Since mowers must be driven onto the tees and greens, single-rider cars should be able to follow the same paths. “But tiered greens could be more of a challenge,” Phelps notes.

He estimates that complying with the new ADA provisions may run up course-construction costs “a couple of percentage points,” but notes that adding length to holes is a greater cost factor for today’s course owners.

“I think it’s up to the attitude of the architect,” Phelps says. “If the architect says, ‘Yeah, we can do that,’ I don’t think it’s that difficult and it won’t detract from the artistry of the golf course.”

Other issues

Don Tolson was certified superintendent during the construction and opening of Fox Hollow, the highly rated public links course in Lakewood, Colo. (he has since moved to Stock Farm Club in Hamilton, Mont.). With Dennis Griffiths & Associates as architects, he helped plan Fox Hollow as a disabled-friendly course soon after ADA passed (it’s been the site of an annual disabled golfers’ tournament). When the course opened in 1992, at least two tees per hole and all greens were accessible. There were also no curbs on the cart paths to restrict disabled golfers and their cars, except where they were needed for drainage. All grades were set with an eye on access codes.

“If (a tee or green) was on a fairly steep grade, we started farther back with the path,” Tolson says. “It didn’t change irrigation patterns or mowing patterns or anything.”

“It never added construction time or cost to the project. One of our goals in the beginning was to [build] it without compromising the quality and aesthetic aspects of the course — and we did that.”

Disabled golfer Tom Houston, a 62-year-old 18-handicapper from Merritt Island, Fla., was also on the advisory group for the Access Board. He’s been on a crusade to promote accessible golf since 1989 and has cajoled his way onto more than 600 courses in 49 states (“I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer,” he says). Houston, paralyzed from the waist down, developed his own wheelchair cart with 6-inch-wide front tires and 3-inch-wide back tires. He says he leaves no marks on tees or greens and can stay on top of most sand.

“I can play the whole game, which is important to me,” Houston says. “Golf is a chance for a person with a disability to get out and play a game with able-bodied people and play it by the same rules.” He says this is rare since most disabled people must play by “special rules.”

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Advocates say golf is an inclusive sport for people with disabilities, including the blind.

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Houston maintains that compliance will not be that burdensome for golf courses, and he argues that the modifications allowing access to greens and tees, which flatten grades, will also benefit the growing number of senior golfers for whom steep grades can be a problem on foot. His biggest quibble with the new guidelines is that they do not stipulate the same access to bunkers. The Access Board reasoned that bunkers are hazards and not desirable places for golfers, but Houston has another take — his score is suffering when he must ask a playing partner to get his ball out of the sand for him. “I’m taking a penalty stroke when I shouldn’t have to take a penalty stroke,” he says.

Tolson says the only place Fox Hollow didn’t succeed in its accessibility was the bunkers. Players there also must get someone else in their group to toss the ball out to them and take a stroke. He used his experience at the Colorado course to help in construction at Stock Farm. Though the Montana track is private and opened in 1999, before the recent new guidelines, it is set up with easy grades to accommodate older golfers with hip problems and other debilities. Tolson views the new ADA provisions as being in harmony with the need for all courses to accommodate the higher number of those golfers today, particularly seniors, who suffer from decreased mobility.

“What (golf courses) need to comply with is pretty much standard on most courses anyway — as long as they can comply with the philosophy of where people can drive [a car],” he says.

The biggest current controversy centers on the single-rider cars and their utility for a wide

range of disabilities. Houston calls it “the unresolved part” of the access debate — specifically whether golf facilities must be required to keep single-rider cars in stock to accommodate a disabled golfer should one come to play. That decision lies in the hands of the Department of Justice, which has not made a ruling.

But a court ruling on golf courses operated by the city of Indianapolis took up the issue. In the accessibility settlement brought on by that case, the city was required to purchase and have on hand at least two single-rider cars for golfers who might need them. The two cars can be moved among the various municipal courses so that each one does not have to stock them. This decision may have set the stage for future rulings. “That doesn’t mean it sets a total precedent . . . it’s hard to say,” Houston says.

Robb, the advocate for accessible golf, says that the Justice Department must rule on this and other issues such as whether all courses must allow single-rider cars on putting surfaces. Those rulings have yet to come. He says the department has indicated it will make the call on these access questions, but adds that “it is very possible that litigation will beat them to it.”

Houston maintains that single-rider cars, unless they fit more disabled golfers in the future, are not the answer. He says there are too many individuals that can’t use the cars because of their unique disabilities. “Maybe 10 percent of the paralyzed population could use one of these cars, and that’s not a big enough percentage,” he says. “We have to get to 50 percent.”

Samuelson agrees that no one car can be fitted for every disabled golfer.

Houston suggests that disabled golfers obtain their own equipment and bring it to the courses. This also takes the burden off operators who might be forced to decide who can play safely on their courses or use course-supplied equipment if that is mandated.

“Pretty much everything you hear about single-riders are opinions and not based on any specific research results,” Robb says. “It is a hot topic.

“Single-rider cars *do* provide greater access and, for some, are the only reasonable way to play. Unfortunately, we still do not have answers as to how many golfers will or could use them, as well as safety and training issues.” ■

Allan is a free-lance writer from Floyds Knobs, Ind.

Learn More

For more information on accessibility issues, contact these Web sites:

www.accessgolf.org

National Alliance for Accessible Golf. The site offers a toolkit for golf course owners, operators and superintendents to assist in improving the accessibility of golf courses to golfers with disabilities.

www.ncaonline.org

National Center on Accessibility

<http://golfcenterdisabilities.usga.org>
USGA Resource Center for Individuals with Disabilities