



# On the Range

**G**ood golfers love them, bad golfers need them, and like the rest of the golf course, superintendents have to diligently maintain them. They are practice ranges, and providing a facility that players deem “good” or even “excellent” can go a long way in building customer loyalty and bolstering course revenue.

While definitions of “good” and “excellent” vary, superintendents polled for this article generally agreed on the elements that make a practice range attractive and easy to use: The

**BY SHANE SHARP**

number of driving stalls should be commensurate with the number of members (private course) or average daily golfers (daily fee or resort); the putting green should mirror the actual greens on the course in speed and undulation; and a short-game area for chipping is essential for attracting serious golfers.

“Consumers want space, good conditions, nice golf balls and a realistic setting,” says Steve di Costanzo, president of the Golf Range

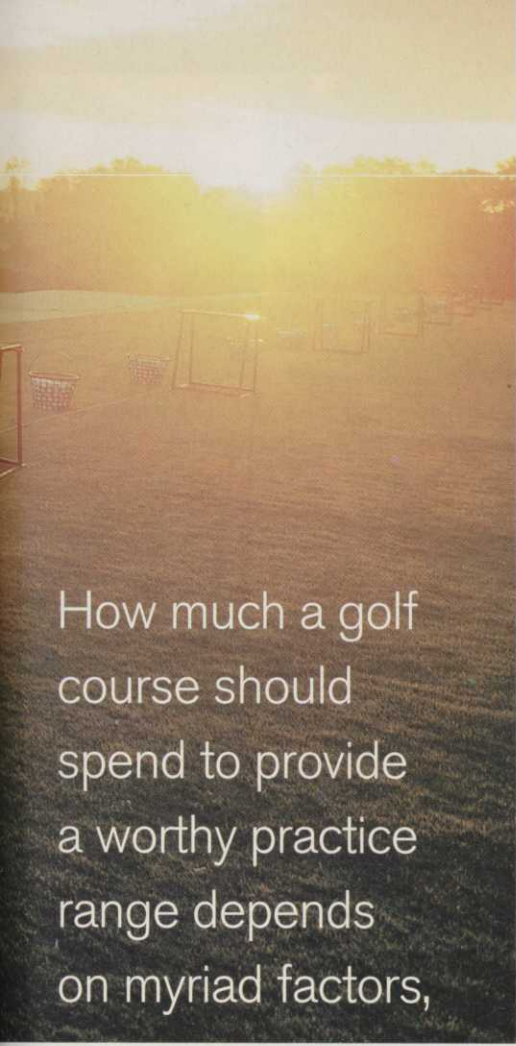
Association of America (GRAA) in New Canaan, Conn.

Each year the GRAA ranks the top 100 ranges in the United States by region, based on a variety of criteria. In addition to the above elements, di Costanzo says a practice range vying for a spot in the rankings should have well-defined target greens laser-measured with specific distances from each hitting bay, a natural turf putting green built to United States Golf Association (USGA) specifications, and a short-game area with quality turf that lets players check the spin on their chip shots.

“You can’t just have grass mowed short on the tee, you have to have the same grass that’s on the golf course,” adds di Costanzo.

So how much should a course budget to provide a Top 100-worthy practice range, or just one of which members or loyal daily-fee golfers can be proud? The answer exists along a sliding scale — one affected by geography, labor rates and climate.

At the famed Olympic Club in San Francisco, superintendent Pat Finlen spends up-



How much a golf course should spend to provide a worthy practice range depends on myriad factors, including geography, labor rates and climate

wards of \$100,000 on labor alone to maintain a practice facility that houses a 60,000-square-foot, four-level driving range with 28 stations, a 5,000-square-foot chipping green with two practice bunkers, and two putting greens that total 25,000 square feet.

"It's an expansive facility that the members love and utilize at astounding rates," Finlen says. "We recently reconstructed the Cliffs putting green and the Lake chipping green and we're looking at lengthening the driving range to accommodate today's technologically advanced equipment."

According to Finlen, the Olympic Club spends \$30,000 per year on materials — post reconstruction — including sand/peat mix, seed, fertilizer, water, tee towels, makers and other items. His staff mows the driving range three times a week to fairway height and fills

divots, daily.

The Olympic Club's members can't seem to get enough of the facility. Finlen says the driving range is at 60 percent to 70 percent capacity all day, and the chipping area is utilized about 50 percent of the time.

"We have 350 members with handicaps of 10 or under, so they appreciate the range and the way it is maintained," he says.

The gap in maintenance expenditures between a private club with a 12-month season and a resort course with a 30-week season can be more like a chasm. At Circling Raven Golf Club at the Coeur D'Alene Casino and Resort in Worley, Idaho, superintendent Brian Woster gets by on about \$21,000 a year — roughly \$100,000 less than Finlen.

"The maintenance costs of the practice putting green are absorbed into the costs of the other 18 greens on the course," Woster says. "We're able to provide a first-rate practice facility at a very reasonable cost."

Opened in 2003, the Gene Bates-designed course boasts a driving range and short-game area across from the clubhouse that gives the appearance of being endless in scope and stature as it blends into the surrounding hills and wheat fields. Golfers can pound balls into oblivion from a generous collection of 14 stations, or chip and pitch from nine stations to an expertly coifed chipping green.

"Golfers want large — a large driving range, a large putting green and plenty of space to maneuver," Woster says.

According to Woster, his staff mows the range landing area and target greens once a week and the range tees and chipping green every other day. Materials, limited to top-dressing, sand and seed, run just over \$5,500.

"I would think if you look at the national picture, this is a very good practice facility," Woster says.

Clubs and courses with average practice ranges looking to upgrade to top-notch facilities such as those at the Olympic Club and

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**A short-game area for chipping is essential for attracting serious golfers.**

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Circling Raven can expect significant increases in maintenance costs, depending upon the size of the expansion and the additional labor required to maintain it.

Dick Stuntz, superintendent at the 36-hole Alvarado Golf and Country Club in Lawrence, Kan., recently oversaw the addition of a 15,000-square-foot, three-tier bentgrass green designed to facilitate pitching, chipping and bunker shots. Alvarado also expanded its driving range from 30,000 square feet to 100,000, making it one of the larger facilities in the area.

"The entire project brought our annual maintenance expenses on the range from \$20,000 to \$75,000," Stuntz says.

Stuntz is quick to point out that what works for a 36-hole club with one public and one private course doesn't work for every course. He believes a 25,000- to 30,000-square-foot driving range should suffice for a small membership-based 18-hole private club.

"Range size and the maintenance costs depend on a number of factors," Stuntz says. "Amount of play, weather, staffing levels and even course classification come into play."

If there is one constant when it comes to budgeting for practice range upkeep, it's that most superintendents don't separate range maintenance from course maintenance. Finlen,

Woster and Stuntz each had to extract figures from their annual budgets.

The practice also holds true along the eastern seaboard.

"In my experience we haven't separated the range from the course in budgeting," says Dan Evers, superintendent at Reston National in Reston, Va. "Not that it would be a bad idea, we just haven't approached it that way."

Evers says his course and other Billy Casper Golf-operated facilities budget maintenance according to total greens, fairways and rough. Putting and chipping greens are budgeted with greens, the driving range stations with fairways and the landing area with the rough.

Average annual maintenance costs for practice ranges at Billy Casper Golf-managed properties in the Mid-Atlantic are about \$60,000, according to Evers, based on a 12-month growing season with cool weather grasses.

Figures in the balmy, bermudagrass-dominated Southeast are similar. At the Tega Cay Golf Club in Tega Cay, S.C., superintendent Aaron Nolan spends about \$55,000 annually to maintain what many local golfers feel is one of the top practice facilities in the Charlotte area.

"Our labor and materials costs are fairly close," Nolan says.

During a major overhaul that included the construction of a new nine holes, clubhouse and outdoor pavilion, Tega Cay installed a concrete slab with practice mats and tees on a tier just below the turf-teeing stations. Nolan says the addition was out of necessity and was not a cost-saving measure.

"Our grass teeing area is only 6,000 to 8,000 square feet," he says. "We use the mats three days a week to put less stress on the natural turf."

In addition to the driving range, Tega Cay features two putting greens and a chipping green that total 35,000 square feet, and a practice bunker on the far end of the range near the first tee of one of its three nine-hole courses.

"It's a unique setup that appeals to golfers," Nolan says. ■

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