

Extreme

The practice range at Traverse City Golf & Country Club was made near perfect thanks to an extensive renovation

BY RAYMOND HEARN AND STEVEN J. HAMMON

Traverse City Golf & Country Club (TCG) was established in 1915 and sits on 143 acres just a few minutes from Traverse City's vibrant downtown.

The Michigan course is a classic Tom Bendelow design. The club has an enthusiastic membership and loads of social activities and golf events, a solid food and beverage program, a recently remodeled clubhouse and numerous amenities, including a new fitness facility — all to keep the membership active throughout the year. In that context, the club's outdated practice facility seemed out of character.

The range was improved in 1984 when the club relocated four holes to bring it from the middle of the course nearer to the clubhouse, but it was still ill-suited to real game improvement. Smaller and inefficient in its use of space, the range was essentially a place to

warm up: two target flags on an uphill slope. It seemed more a liability than an asset to attract and retain members.

An extensive survey of the membership in 2001 ultimately confirmed many members' dissatisfaction with the range, and the green committee decided to address the problem. We collaborated until our vision — as designer, superintendent and membership — was clear for what the redesigned range should be. We began construction on the range in August 2006. The range re-opened last June.

Game improvement

The first golf courses in Scotland had no practice facilities, so why are they necessary today? Although their importance to a golf course's overall operation often remains neglected, the game's changing nature has made them as rigorous as oversized drivers and other improvements in equipment. Crucial to our oft-stated goal of "growing the game," a quality practice facility also constitutes a huge competitive advantage among existing golfers.

Resort owners typically seem more attuned to the benefits of an upscale practice facility. Unfortunately, many golf course owners and private clubs have not grasped all these advantages. (Some have, though. We know of one upscale semi-private course that turned its practice facility into a profit center by selling unlimited-use memberships.) As in all such redesign projects, TCG's progressive approach relied heavily on cooperation and frequent communication between all interested parties, including Country Golf, the contractor that executed the design specifications on time and within budget.



The authors, Steven Hammon (left) and Raymond Hearn, discuss an aspect of the project.



Makeover

TCG's priorities in updating its practice facility included the following:

- main tee,
- green,
- bunker practice area,
- chipping areas,
- target greens,
- target fairways,
- target bunkers and
- sides and end of the range.

Plenty of room on the practice tee

The initial focus of most ranges is the practice tee, and the most common shortcoming is insufficient square footage, leading to overuse and accompanying difficulty in maintaining healthy, lush grass.

Ideally, 20,000 square feet to 30,000 square feet of surface area is allocated for the practice tees, but that's not plausible at many layouts.

Some 10 percent to 20 percent more square footage can be attained by simply adjusting grades, maximizing surrounds and other strategies. Other typical problems plaguing practice tees are misalignment, uneven surfaces, poor drainage, lack of proper soils, improper turfgrass, and tree and root encroachment.

Everyone was pleasantly surprised by the amount of space we were able to recapture for the TCG practice tee, which was initially 11,200 square feet. By removing a space-wast-

ing tier and pushing surrounds to the limit, we gained 2,605 square feet. In addition, the single-level tee was seeded using topsoil from the site, mixed on-site with sand, which produced an easily maintained turfgrass surface.

About the green

Check out the practice green at a place like Pinehurst and it's clear what a huge amenity, and even an identity element, it represents. Sure, that's a rather grand example, but more modest practice greens can be just as appealing. (That was, and is, the case at TCG, where, thanks to its ample size and pleasing proportions, the practice green was left untouched in the redesign.) Again, practice greens we've visited elsewhere often suffer from the "logistical" problems cited above, as well as one other. Their surfaces often fail to provide the desired sense of contour and speed of those on the course, meaning that practice might actually hurt one's performance in play.

To give golfers a representative sample of the putting surfaces they can expect to find over the next 18 holes generally requires 8,000 square feet to 15,000 square feet. Needless to say, it also ought to be built using the same design and construction techniques used on the holes themselves. Regrettably, this is frequently not the case when practice greens are installed as an afterthought.

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After a survey of members revealed dissatisfaction with the range, the Traverse City Golf & Country Club decided on a detailed upgrade. The result is above.



A good rule of thumb is to build bunkers at least 75 feet long and 30 feet wide, allowing 10- to 15-foot spacing between practicing players.

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Practice bunkers: The real thing

Considering the need for most players to work on their bunker shots — we speak from experience here — practice bunkers are in especially short supply. The correlation is probably that skulled shots from bunkers, a standard hacker's miscue, require a buffer zone between them and other practice areas. Thus, the ideal complement of two bunkers — one emulating greenside play and the other fairway bunker shots — is sometimes prohibitive.

As with the practice green, the sand and depth of the bunkers should simulate their on-course cousins. A good rule of thumb is to build bunkers at least 75 feet long and 30 feet wide, allowing 10- to 15-foot spacing between practicing players. Again, like the bunkers on the course, they need to be built for proper drainage and maintenance.

Spatial considerations limited the absolute size of TCG's practice bunker, but repositioning it directly in front of the chipping green made bunker practice much more targeted and also allowed for increased simultaneous usage by members in adjacent areas.

Wanted: Space for chipping areas

Like practice bunkers, chipping areas are in short supply, in some measure because a good one requires at least 20,000 square feet. A standard space-condensing approach, which we used at TCG, is to devote a portion of the practice green to chipping, although this may require segregated cupping areas and other traffic-control tactics to minimize competing uses.

At the other extreme, facilities with 3 acres to 15 acres at their disposal can create a chipping course, with up to nine holes testing various short-game skills — a great place to get the kids started.

With the repositioning of the practice bunker at TCG, we saw an opportunity to create a new bentgrass chipping area that can be mowed to collar height around the practice bunker and part of the chipping green. We thereby increased the chipping green's size by more than a third and created new angles — over the bunker, for instance — for shots to it.

Golfers love target greens

While the absence of practice bunkers and chipping greens may be due purely to land-availability constraints, the absence of target greens, even at exclusive private clubs, is a bit more baffling to us. Target greens are comparatively inexpensive and golfers, who consistently tell us they visualize hitting their practice shots to greens, love them. Why should golfers spend their practice time hitting into a flat field?

Unlike your practice green, of course, target greens need not be built like the real thing — you can use regular topsoil. Keys to their visual appeal are to make them 4,000 square feet or larger and to cant them back to front at roughly 10 percent, that is, tilted to face the practice tee.

Before-and-after photos at TCG were an instant hit with members and their guests. The images show how the new target greens, which replaced the usual series of colored poles, add definition and pizzazz to the range.

The new targets were even built with fill generated from grading the surface of the range to remove "blind spots" that had existed about 185 yards from the tees. Target greens now allow players to practice shots from as little as 40 yards and as much as 270 yards, and the "on-course" feel is enhanced by bunkers also built with recycled fill.

Target fairways and bunkers

You can further recreate the playing experience with features like target fairways lined with bunkers, as we did to great effect and universal approval at TCG.

Bunkers can be built using a permeable liner and filled with limestone rock approximating the color of the sand on the course, again configured with an exaggerated slope (10 percent to 15 percent) for utmost visibility from the tee. The coarse surface allows ball-retrieval equipment to be driven through the bunkers.

The fairway in the center of the range at TCG simulates a par 4 with bunkers, a fairway and a green. The range's other fairways, bunkers and target greens are laid out as par 3s of various length — a lot of bang for the construction buck.

The periphery

Sometimes netting is an unavoidable safety requirement on one or more sides of the range, but the most attractive practice facilities use mounding, tree plantings, and other natural features to delineate boundaries. The esthetic advantage is obvious, but trees and other such forms also sharpen practice by providing framing and aid depth perception.

At TCG we maintained the dense woods on the left side of the range that separate it from a road. We also preserved a dense stand of trees at the back of the range to add perspective. We created landforms standing 10-feet to 20-feet tall on the range's right side to emphasize the physical and psychological barrier between the practice range and the first hole.

Ins and outs

Delighted as we are with TCG's redesigned practice facility, we offer the following tips:

- As a sort of stepchild of some golf facilities, proper construction and maintenance are often given short shrift. Treat your practice facility with the same high standards you treat your course and you will be rewarded.
- Its effectiveness as a game-improvement tool aside, your practice facility often sets the tone for everything that follows.

We think of some of the most scenic ones around — White Witch in Jamaica comes to mind — and recall a sense of excitement and anticipation before we ever see the first tee.

- Trust all of your contractors' technical expertise, past experience, advice and direction just as your members or owners trust yours.

- Devise a specific communication plan with your members, owners or boards. We took pictures daily during the project and included two or three progress photos in a brief e-mail every Friday afternoon to the entire membership.

Old Tom Morris may never have considered a practice facility, but he was, after all, playing with hickory shafts and a gutta percha ball.

Today, St. Andrews has an elaborate practice facility. And we are just as pleased with our redone facility at TCG and continue to enjoy the many benefits it confers on the club's members. Naturally, it took commitment and energy, but proved well worth it.

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