



WE'RE TALKING PRACTI

As golfers' time and money dry up, practice is becoming a popular game changer.

BY BETH GERACI

Remember when golfers whiled away full days at the club? We realize you might have to go back a ways. Because golfers today either are pinching pennies or pinched for time. In response, they're setting their sights less on a round of 18 and more on the driving range target flag.

As the average golfer's habits evolve, golf clubs must adapt or be left behind. That's why they are rushing to invest in chipping areas, target greens and anything else that makes for better... (gulp!)... practice. In fact, it appears that practice has never been so much fun, or so important to clubs' futures.

CE?!?



PHOTO BY: RYAN BOCKMULLER; PHOTO (INSET) COURTESY: MATT SHAFFER

What changed

“I don’t know where to start,” said Mid-Atlantic Director for the USGA Green Section Stan Zontek. “Number one, if you look at the demographics of today’s golfer — husband and wife, two kids, young professional — unfortunately, they don’t have time to play golf. But they have time to practice. Everything we see is all about practice.”

The game, too, has changed along with golf equipment and players’ desire for immediate results, Zontek said. Golf practice first became a factor in the 1970s with the development of the graphite shaft, he asserted. “People wanted to hit the graph-

ite shaft to see if the ball went farther than with a steel shaft,” he said. “And they had to go to a practice range to find out. That’s when people started to compare golf clubs... It started then to snowball.”

As golf gravitates more toward practice, older golf courses worldwide struggle to adapt. They simply don’t have space to expand. Even in St. Andrews, Scotland, Zontek said, one course had to abandon two holes and redesign to make room for a practice range.

Zontek’s USGA counterpart Bob Brame, the North Central Director for the USGA Green Section, observes the same space constraints among older courses in his region. Without a doubt, those that can expand should, he said.

Practice areas “pull players in,” he said. “A facility that has a good practice area is going to draw players more and hold ‘em once they get there. Investing in practice areas is money well spent. That’s the bottom line. There’s no question that people are more into practicing now than 10 or 15 years ago.”

Merion Golf Club

The management at Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, Pa. recognized that too, and from October to December 2010 the club’s practice area underwent a \$2 million renovation.

Today, the club’s practice area features a 6,000-square-foot learning center; 38,000 square feet of Penn Trio bentgrass driving range tees; and a 12,000-square-foot chipping area complete with a green and two bunkers.

Merion revamped its practice area to help the club’s head golf pro, Scott Nye, who had elevated the club’s junior golf program but didn’t have the amenities necessary to take his program a step higher.

“Before, it was horrendous,” said Merion Director of Golf Course Operations Matt Shaffer of the club’s practice area. “We didn’t have an indoor teaching facility at all, and our tee was grossly undersized. Our chipping area was terrible.”

Nye arrived at the club in 2000. By 2004, Shaffer said, “Scott had interest in golf really churning here. It was painfully obvious he needed a facility to teach in.”

Now, Nye works out of a greystone learning facility that matches the club’s original quarrystone. While reminiscent of a home from the outside, inside, the learning facility features

three heated, state-of-the-art teaching bays, a club fitting center, upgraded camera and computer hardware for client instruction, and a small living room with a fireplace.

Pre-renovation, Nye took clients to Florida for winter instruction. Now, he doesn’t have to. “It can be snowing like crazy and he can put the garage doors up and hit out onto the range,” Shaffer said.

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Merion’s 6,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art learning center.

Practice Makes Perfect

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Merion's new sand-based chipping area, meanwhile, enables members to replicate any golf shot, including fairway and bunker shots. It also has extensive drainage and a precision air system underneath it to keep it dry.

"It kind of culminates what we are at Merion," Shaffer said of the practice facility. "On the golf course, it was our last weak link. Now, it completes us."

World Woods Golf Club

"It's a monster."

That's how James Rawlings, director of golf course maintenance at World Woods Golf Club, Brooksville, Fla., describes the club's 2-acre hillside practice putting green.

And the mammoth putting green is just one component of World Woods' renowned practice area.

The club also boasts a 22-acre circular driving range with bunkers, target greens and target fairways; a nine-hole, 1,800-yard short course; and three practice holes ranging from a par-3 to a par-5.

The practice area's best attribute is its size, said World Woods head golf pro Scott Wyckoff. The driving range was built in 1993. At the time, it was believed to be the largest range in the United States. "It kind of started a trend," Rawlings said.

The club built the range so that tour players could practice in any type of situation. "Angle-wise, left to right, wind, rain, you can do that," Wyckoff said.

But despite the demand for World Woods' mammoth practice facility, Wyckoff isn't ready to say wholeheartedly that golf is becoming a game of practice, especially at a public destination resort like World Woods.

Economy a factor

Even so, World Woods has its share of tour players, collegiate teams and junior golfers who come down solely to practice, Wyckoff said, adding there's no doubt the economy has changed the game's landscape.

"People are not as comfortable as they were six, seven years ago," he said. "It's not the same environment. The days when people were a little bit more comfortable in their job, when companies could write things off, that was yesterday."



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It's why many World Woods golfers tee up on the 9-hole short course, which costs \$17 a round, Rawlings said. "A lot of the older couples on fixed incomes or who have been hurt financially are migrating to the cheaper golf," he said.

Orange County National

At Orlando's Orange County National Golf Course and Lodge, home to two reputable 18-hole public courses, Director of Golf Alan Walker has on his hands one of the most extensive practice areas in the country. It's an area that includes a 9-hole executive course, a learning facility, two putting greens, a chipping area — and the largest driving range in the U.S.

The 42-acre, circular driving range is one mile in circumference. It is surrounded by four target greens with bunkers for a "real golf course experience," Walker said. And the range's eight sets of tee boxes, which like the bowl of the range feature bermudagrass, rotate from front to back.

"We have a lot of demand for the practice area around here," Walker said. The area also includes "The Studio," a hitting area featuring artificial turf, covered hitting bays, offices and video classrooms.

That variety is exactly what practice ranges need in order to compete, Zontek said. "There have to be several components to it," he said. "A big practice range tee that would allow people to practice on grass. They usually have some artificial turf, too — they need both. And they've got to have all-weather surfaces.

"They have to be 300-plus yards long. They need to have target greens... Then you've got to have the building for your teaching. You have to have a bunker — usually there are several. You've also got to have a short game area."

So, creating a worthy practice area is not easy. But it is the future.

During the last few years, golf has declined, Walker said. That's one reason why at Orange County National "use of the practice facility has increased compared to full course use," he said.

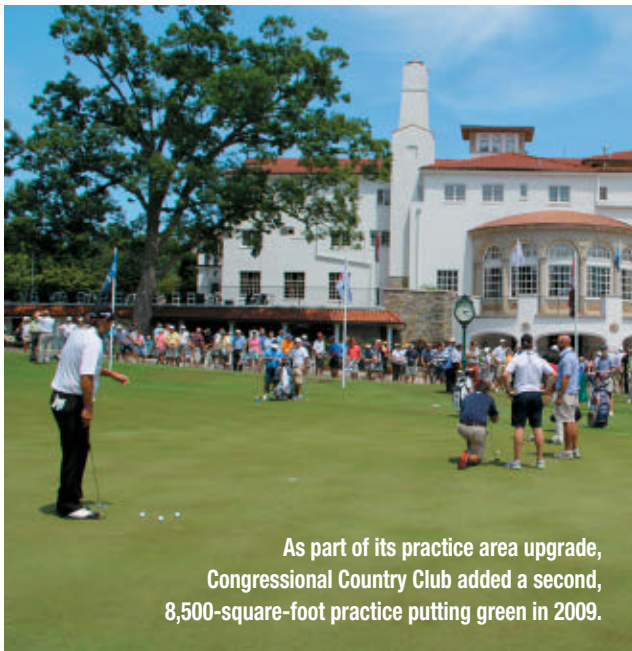
Walker attributes the jump in practice to golfers' increasingly busy lifestyles. "People can come out and still get enjoyment from the game if they can't afford the four or four and a half hours of golf," Walker said. "We get people who it's their entire agenda to come to the practice

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Practice Makes Perfect



Orange County National's 42-acre, circular driving range (left) is the largest in the country; Its par-29 short course (below) is "pretty sweet," says OCN Director of Golf Alan Walker.



As part of its practice area upgrade, Congressional Country Club added a second, 8,500-square-foot practice putting green in 2009.

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facility. It's more of a destination."

Because of the practice area's popularity, the club offers a 90-day package that includes 72 buckets of balls, complimentary walking privileges on Orange County National's 9-hole executive course, and a reduced rate for walk-on golf at the championship course.

"You don't have to play 18 holes to be considered a golfer," said Walker. "Golf practice is taking on a more important role as an alternative to traditional golf rounds. I would think that you can practice mostly and still consider yourself a golfer."

Congressional Country Club

"It's something that our members wanted. And it definitely gets a lot of use throughout the course of the year."

So says Congressional Country Club Director of Golf Course Maintenance Mike Giuffre of the club's short game practice area. Congressional last revamped its driving range in 2005, adding target greens to the range floor. In the late summer of 2009, its short game practice area underwent a major upgrade, too. Until then, it consisted of just one putting green and one chipping green, with limited fairway grass from which to chip.

"We blew it all up and started over," Giuffre said. Congressional constructed a new 8,500-square-foot putting green and "we put in a pitching area and a chipping area," Giuffre said. "We added more fairway grass along with the rough, so they can practice shots off of both fairway and rough conditions." The chipping green has three bunkers and consumes 12,000 square feet.

"What we had before just didn't provide [members] with all the avenues to practice all the different shots that they were interested in doing," Giuffre said.

The renovations were a good move, he added, especially because "in today's society, more and more people are working longer hours. So this is a chance for them to get in a few shots and still feel like they're working on their game."

Here to stay

Giuffre said Congressional's observance that more people practice today than they did 10 years ago, and more often, was the driving force behind Congressional's upgrades. "It's like the old adage 'If you build it they will come,'" he said.

Practice is good for the game, Zontek said. And like it or not, "this practice thing isn't going to go away soon. It's really not. It's going to progress." ■