

A Little Help From His Friends

The Chiricahua Course (one of six) is 7,424 yards from the tips with a slope rating of 154.

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chise course. "I asked (Emerson) three or four time if he was sure we should kill it."

That uncertainty at the implementation level can be a potentially huge problem in microclimates that require tightly scripted maintenance programs for sustained results. Emerson stops his gaggle of senior crew members to point out a *Poa* problem around a bunker entrance that was controlled two years prior. It's back because the course superintendent "wanted to try something different without talking (to me) about his concerns with the program. He waited too long to spray because that's what he did at another golf course," Emerson says glancing at his workers, who are staring at the turf in angst. Then he cracks a smile, but only because he knows that his entourage of up-and-coming agronomists already has learned this lesson.

But it's not the end of the learning curve. The entire process is an intentional learning experience for the Desert Mountain crew and turfgrass gurus alike. Even Yelverton and Brandenburg benefit because they return to N.C. State with a healthy amount of field data they can teach in their classes.

"This is more than just solving Desert Mountain's problems," Brandenburg says. "Some of our educational programs might not have developed if we hadn't been here onsite to observe trends and then take those observations back to the

Southeast to teach. Then, we can follow up to see how well our recommended program worked and tweak it as necessary."

The team spreads the education around the region as well. The day before the crew scrutinized Desert Mountain, it held a seminar for almost 50 area superintendents so they could talk about what pests and problems they were collectively seeing around the area and devise strategies to treat them.

"These issues you have on transition really apply to everyone in the Southwest and many in the Southeast as well," Yelverton says. "So these local meetings are as good as any educational meetings you'll find because they are specific to the area. And when you have someone like Shawn who is as well-versed as he is in all the practical aspects, then you have a lot more value. It's ideal when you can get academics and superintendents together to put on seminars."

Emerson also reciprocates with a guest lecture each semester at N.C. State. His talk, "Things You Don't Learn in Turf School," is widely anticipated throughout the program.

"A high percentage of students want to go into golf until Shawn comes to talk to them," Brandenburg jokes.

The origins of excellence

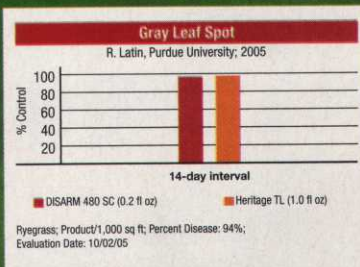
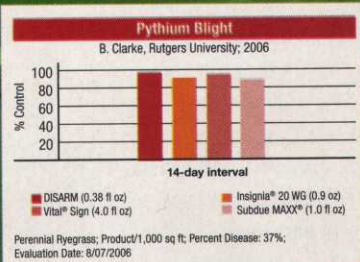
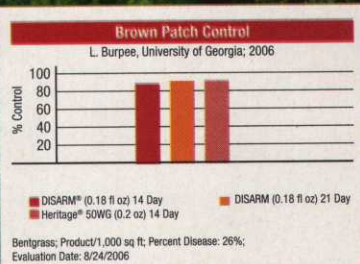
Desert Mountain didn't always run like a deer. It had as many procedural ineffi-

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Diagnostic tests can identify problems that might need to be solved in a particular order.

From left, Spectron Labs' Stuart Buck, Apache superintendent Rick Hildreth, James Beard and Shawn Emerson discuss Apache's fairway resurfacing project. It was such a success (now grown in) that management expects to do another course next year.



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ciencies and chemical failures as any facility in the Southwest. But the crew kept exhaustive records. They tracked their respective spray formulations, sprayer calibrations, fertility regimen, clipping yields, outbreak occurrences, irrigation volume and cultural practices, to name a few. If it could be measured, Emerson and his course superintendents had it written down somewhere.

Those metrics — despite the quality of their outcomes — established the crucial baseline necessary to tweak the various maintenance programs.

Beard says preliminary benchmarks also are vital to gauge improvements once a maintenance protocol is being tweaked.

“You have to be honest about the history, and superintendents must have good records,” Beard says. “A superintendent is a keen observer of his golf course and has the ability to note changes that help piece together how and why something happened.

“Some of these problems are very complex. You need to be willing to run some tests and spend some money on diagnostic analysis so you can identify situations where problems might need to be solved in a particular order.”

The diagnosis of turfgrass trouble often begins with above-ground symptoms. But as Beard shoves his nose in a core sample from a fairway at Desert Mountain, he says superin-

tendents often neglect to regularly investigate their soils when determining the health and viability of their golf turf.

“We need to do a better job looking underground for problems instead of above ground,” Beard says. “No one ever gives you an owner’s manual on exactly how to grow grass, so superintendents have to do their part. That’s why we can have as many failures as successes.”

But fresh perspectives can help mitigate the failures. The consulting and learning process is a lot of work and a serious commitment, but the time and money invested pays off. Sure, many courses might not have a \$13.4-million budget, but most of Desert Mountain’s budget goes to labor (52 percent) and utilities (18 percent) just like many other golf courses. So it goes to reason that many superintendents can finagle 1 percent of their respective budgets for outside consultations, perhaps beginning with USGA Section agronomists and university extension specialists.

“It doesn’t matter if you are a Desert Mountain or a muni, you still have an obligation to be a good steward of your dollars,” says Stuart Buck, president of Spectron Laboratories, a soil analysis and consulting firm in Phoenix. He has been working with Desert Mountain since 1992. “Shawn has just as tight of a budget relative to expectations as any golf course. You still must be responsible with the dollars.”

And those dollars go a lot further with a little help from academia, industry manufacturers and suppliers. This year, the club is using almost 10 percent less water because grass stands are stronger, and fairway-resurfacing projects have produced better rootzones and waterflow. The club makes better use of its chemicals as well because the harsh but predictable Sonora Desert yields very small windows for optimum chemical efficacy. The cultural and technical improvements create better turf, happier golfers and more man-hours to accomplish other things around the golf course.

“My ultimate goal is to drive down operational costs,” Emerson says. “Whatever I spend on consultant fees and advice comes back to me both agronomically and economically. You need a long-range plan to be successful at providing great conditions today and also solve problems that might occur tomorrow.” ■



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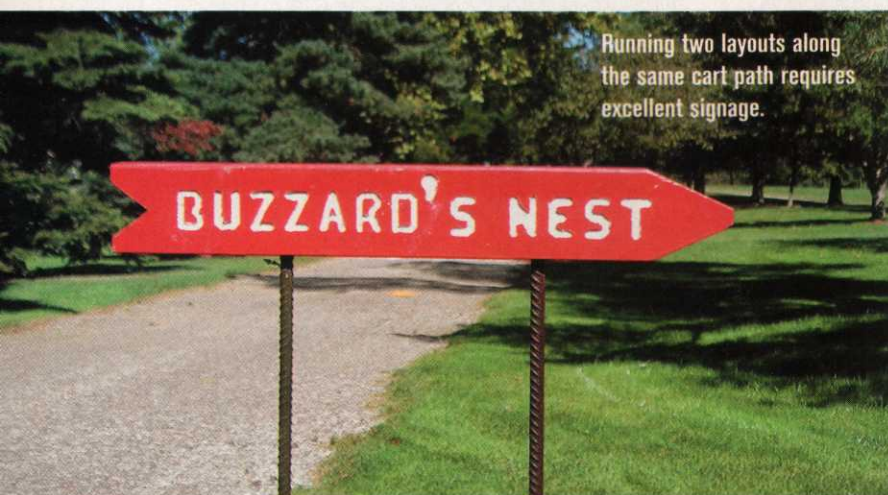
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Find Your Niche



Running two layouts along the same cart path requires excellent signage.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This story and the accompanying Quick Tips examine several golf courses and the marketing initiatives that helped them create more rounds.

Soaring Success: Five-hole Buzzard's Nest elevates area interest and lifts rounds.

BY DAVID FRABOTTA
SENIOR EDITOR

As a peculiar precursor to spring's rebirth, turkey vultures return to Hinckley, Ohio, each March 15. Their homecoming might be thousands of years old, but naturalists just noticed the phenomenon about 100 years ago. So each year, hundreds of spectators converge to get a glimpse of the unlikely harbinger of northern Ohio's seasonal rejuvenation.

Many buzzards make their way to the Hinckley Hills Golf Course and surrounding acres of farmland, and they've become a kind of mascot for the area. So it's appropriate that Hinckley Hills Golf Course named its new five-hole layout the Buzzard's Nest. And just as the giant birds return to the region each season, golfers flock to the area's myriad layouts.

With so many quality golf courses in such a small geographic area, Hinckley Hills needed a way to bring in new business for the short golfing season. The family-owned business wanted to add nine holes. But as suburban sprawl encroached on the course, nine holes just weren't in the cards.

And though its five new holes began as conciliation to those market conditions, it has grown into a forward-looking venture in growing the game and capturing more of the area's wallet share.

Situated in the middle of the 1964 Harold Paddock layout, five holes of the original championship design have been remarked, rebranded and resold as the Buzzard's Nest, which is in its third year of operation.

"Play has been up and down the past few years, but it's definitely generating interest and business," says general manager Susan Smith, daughter of Donald Krush, who developed the golf course from farmland. "It's a nice way to introduce beginners to the game of golf because it's not too hard."

Its relative ease has been pivotal for its success. Even though the five holes were part of

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Sister Act: Susan Smith and Jeane Esposito co-operate Hinckley Hills Golf Course, home of the five-hole Buzzard's Nest.

QUICK TIP

Water Works

Residents of Pocomoke City, Md., received a free round of golf with their water bills in July. Pocomoke wanted to bolster awareness and enhance play at the city-owned Winter Quarters Golf Course, and get this: The coupons are fully transferable. Perhaps water-conscious districts would be willing to partner with an area golf course to reward residents who make an effort to conserve water, maybe in conjunction with Smart Irrigation Month?

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the original 18 that slopes at a 125 from the tips, the holes are very manageable for beginners while still offering a challenging greens complex for avid golfers.

Three of the holes are less than 350 yards from the back tees — slightly shorter from the forward tees — with fairways plenty wide for a wayward five-wood or slicing three-iron from the teeing area. No. 3 is 377 from the back tees and 268 from the front tees. And just when you're itching to hit driver, hole No. 5 stretches 460 yards from the tips (340 yards from forward tees) with about 20 yards of elevation on the second shot to the green. It was the No. 1 handicapped hole in the original layout, and it's still a difficult test.

It's fun to play for the experienced golfer, but it's still straightforward enough for children to accompany dad on a Saturday or Sunday when weekend duffers fill the regulation 18 holes.

But more importantly, it's a quick five holes. A busy working dad can play the Buzzard's Nest after work in about an hour on a busy day, and a wide-open five holes can be played in about 40 minutes, which means making it home on time for dinner.

It works out well from an agronomic perspective, too. Jeane Esposito, Smith's sister and co-operator of the facility, handles the grounds and the 23 golf holes as superintendent. She likes to stagger aerification around the course and close down the doctored holes during heal time. The Buzzard's Nest, which golfers play twice while the nine holes heal, allows her to administer aggressive cultural practices without sacrificing quality of play. It also allows her to keep greens cut at .17 of an inch under fairly heavy play.

The only tangible agronomic frustration might be due to golfers' treating the five-hole layout as their personal practice course.

"Sometimes I'll see five divots right next to each other, none of them replaced, of course," Esposito says.

But five holes is plenty for some, judging from positive feedback from the new families that have tried the five-hole concept. And with an \$8.50 price tag, it's about the same price as taking the kids to see the latest "Harry Potter" movie.

"We had a young family out here practicing for a family golf outing, and it was obvious that some of them had never played before," Esposito says. "It took them a little longer than an hour, but they said they really had fun. That's what it's there for."

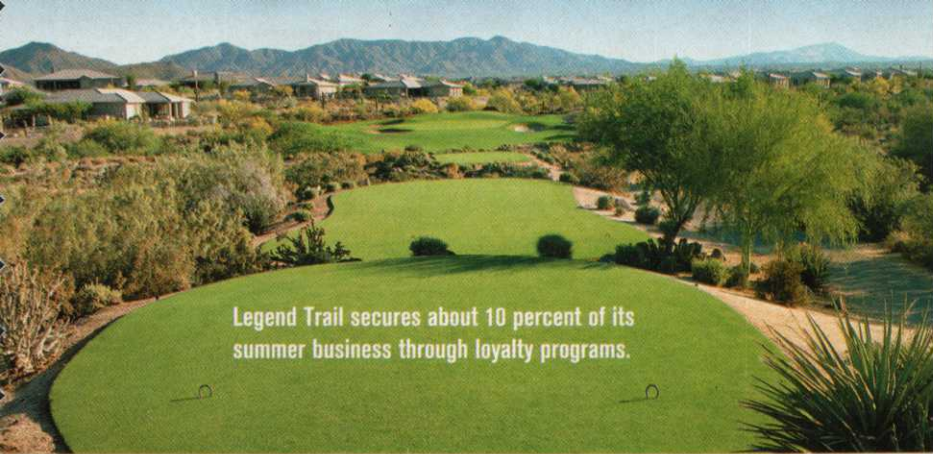
Hinckley Hills hopes such families will return each year as predictably as the area's beloved buzzards.

[ABOUT THIS SERIES] "Growing the Game," a four-part series appearing in *Golfdom* throughout 2007, focuses on how the golf industry can attract more new players to create more rounds. In addition to the third installment on what golf course maintenance suppliers and companies can do to grow the game, we've also reported on the impact that baby boomers could have on increasing play (February) and what golf course architects can do in their designs to make the game more friendly for beginner and average golfers (May). In this final installment, we singled out some of the more creative golf courses in the country to discuss the marketing programs they've implemented to attract new golfers.

Visit our archives at www.golfdom.com to view the 2006-2007 "Growing the Game" series.

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Legend Trail secures about 10 percent of its summer business through loyalty programs.

Loyalty Pays: Legend Trail's frequency program supplements slow season

BY BRUCE ALLAR
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

In Scottsdale, Ariz., summer golf can be a hard sell. The snowbirds have migrated north from their wintering grounds as Sonora Desert temperatures soar into the triple digits. Add the competition of numerous top-flight courses in the area, and the need to stimulate daily rounds becomes obvious.

As a summertime strategy, Legend Trail Golf Club in north Scottsdale, a public facility, sought a way to increase the play of core golfers with a tiered loyalty program. Initially, the goal was to get one more round out of each golfer, says facility general manager Rick Williams. The method: Increase the rewards to golfers based on the frequency of their rounds. So in order to promote return visits, Legend Trail now offers a sliding greens-fee scale to those who purchase a Summer Player Pass.

The \$25 pass was launched in 2006 and repeated this year. Pass holders are able to play on weekdays for \$35 before 11 a.m. and for \$30 after 11 a.m. (add \$15 for weekends) for their first five rounds and then get the sixth round free. Then, rounds seven to 10 cost \$5 less, with the 11th round free, and rounds 12 to 14 another \$5 less, with the 15th round free. That adds up to three free rounds

out of 15. Any further 18-hole outings are assessed at the lowest fee, \$25 early in the day and \$20 after 11 a.m. on weekdays.

"I'd rather get a group out there for 20 bucks a player than not get anybody playing during the summer months here," Williams says.

He estimates that more than 50 percent of rounds played in summer 2007 were by the Summer Player Pass holders, and 75 percent of golfers who purchased the pass played at least 10 rounds during the season, which earned them the lowest greens fees. The normal summer greens fee is \$70.

Legend Trail also sells an annual pass (\$2,600 for residents of the Legend Trail community, \$3,200 for non-residents). But Williams estimates that as many as 80 percent of those members are living elsewhere during the hot months, so the summer pass does not affect those sales.

QUICK TIP

Business Booster

Many golf courses around the country have had good success with various Nine and Dine programs, which invite couples to play nine holes and have dinner at the club. It's a great way to generate revenue on a Friday night, and programs can be catered to single people — where the golf courses play matchmaker — or established couples.

Another promotion, the Loyalty Card, is based on the highly successful Southwest Section PGA Golf Pass.

"You're buying into the opportunity to pay discounted greens fees," Williams says, "and unlike a gym membership, we want you to come back after we sell it to you."

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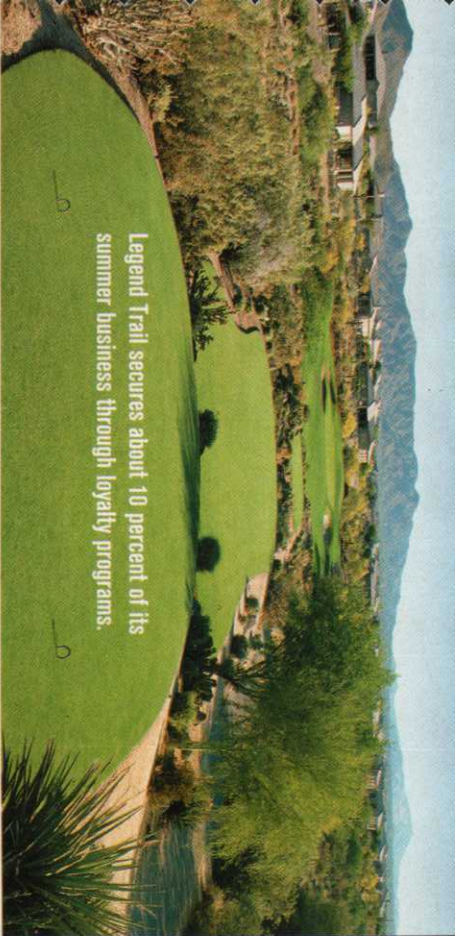
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PHOTO BY: DAVID FRABONIA (LEFT); PHOTO COURTESY: LEGEND TRAIL GOLF CLUB (RIGHT)



Legend Trail secures about 10 percent of its summer business through loyalty programs.

Loyalty Pays: Legend

Trail's frequency program supplements slow season

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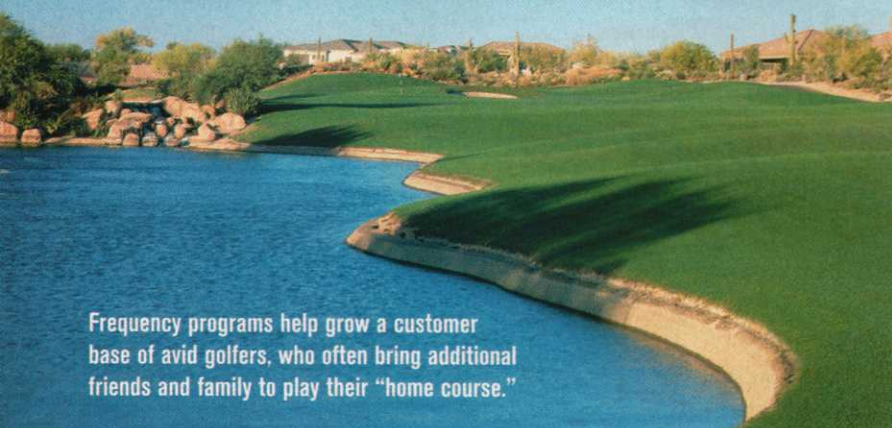
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Frequency programs help grow a customer base of avid golfers, who often bring additional friends and family to play their "home course."

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For \$99, Loyalty Card holders receive a minimum of 50 percent off weekday greens fees — and 25 percent on weekends — year-round for themselves and one guest, among other savings, including a free round for every five played. Williams captures e-mail addresses of card purchasers and blasts out promotions to the group. Among them: golf and lunch specials, Monday and Tuesday specials, and tournaments for Loyalty Card members. If

QUICK TIP

Broaden Your Horizons

The Tri-Valley Academy of Bergenfield received a grant from the United States Golf Association to start a golf program for adolescents with autism. The Far From Par program welcomed 16 middle school and high school students to learn golf etiquette and how to play the game.

Williams spots a wide-open tee sheet for a day or two down the road, he'll send out a mass e-mail offering 60 percent off to Loyalty players to keep the course busy.

This promotion, now in its third year, is his biggest success, Williams says. He will not divulge the number of Loyalty Card members, but estimates that they contribute at least 10 percent of total rounds played.

"We wanted to create a customer base of frequent users," he says. "It was a very simple thing to put together, and it has increased traffic quite a bit."

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