

## On the Oregon Trail



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birds left in July. "The members really got into it," Nielsen says.

They watched the birds lay legs, and they witnessed the baby birds being born. Then they watched the adult birds feed their young.

This spring marks the bird-cam's fourth year. Nielsen and his crew have tweaked a few things to improve the focus of the camera and the clarity of the live stream.

The bird-cam has caused a bit of a fuss in the clubhouse among some bridge-playing women.

"Some of the women were getting upset with the bird-cam because it was distracting their partners from playing cards," Nielsen jokes. "It's hard to play bridge and watch the bird-cam at the same."

The bird-cam cost about \$500, but a price can't be put on the goodwill it has created among members — not to mention the positive environmental story it has become.

While Royal Oaks only has one bird-cam, it has about 28 nesting boxes throughout the golf course. Twenty-two of the boxes were used last year, amounting to about 90 fledglings, mostly swallows with a few chickadees.

"That's quite an impact of birds to put back in the environment," Nielsen says.

**Dave Freitag stands next to inverters in the maintenance facility at The Club at Pronghorn. The energy collected by the solar panels is routed to the inverters, which transform it into electricity.**

### The sun also powers

The Oregon sun powers the lightbulb glowing in Dave Freitag's office at The Club at Pronghorn. The sun also powers the air conditioner, which kicks on with a rush of cool air while the 28-year-old superintendent waxes about the maintenance staff's commitment to environmental integrity at the five-year-old club near Bend. A big part of that commitment is the use of solar power. Three of the four facilities that constitute the club's maintenance complex are equipped with solar panels on their roofs. Freitag, who was named director of agronomy of the club's two 18-hole courses last May, likes that Pronghorn is on the forefront when it comes to energy efficiency.

"We can draw a lot of power off the solar panels," Freitag says. "Everything in the maintenance facility — from the microwave to the lights — is powered by solar."

About 25 electric utility vehicles and golf cars located on the premise are also recharged with solar. The maintenance complex uses some power from the local electric company, but that bill rarely

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## On the Oregon Trail

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tops \$140 a month. "If we didn't have the solar panels, the electric bill would be huge ... just huge," Freitag says.

Freitag points to the inverters in the maintenance facility. The energy collected by solar panels is routed to the inverters, which transforms it into electricity.

It costs about \$1.8 million to construct the solar power system for the maintenance complex. Freitag says the club took a low-interest loan to pay for it. "But it will pay for itself in the long term," he adds.

Freitag is not sure how a solar-powered operation would work at a golf course in a region where there is less sunshine, such as farther west toward the coast.

"It might not be such a good idea on the coast, but we get so much sun here that we take advantage of it," he says.

Freitag says the maintenance staff is doing its environmental duty by using solar power to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that promote global warming. As a superintendent, Freitag says it's "always good" to be ahead of the curve when it comes to technology, especially when it's helping to preserve the environment.

"You'd rather be leading than following," he says. "You're like a guinea pig when you try something like this.

But if it works and it's viable, more people are going to start using it. That can't be a bad thing."

### Let it flow

Once upon a time, in the timber town of Prineville, Ore., there was a wastewater problem. In the late 1980s it was discovered the central Oregon city was inadequately treating its wastewater and discharging contaminants, including chlorine and phosphorus, into the nearby Crooked River.

This was not a good thing, considering that many tourists are attracted to the scenic area with its ridges and canyons for its outdoor recreation, such as fishing in the Crooked River. Because Prineville didn't have the money to upgrade its wastewater treatment facility, the town's leaders had a 10-gallon-hat-sized problem on their hands.

But it was a golf course to the rescue. Prineville's leaders decided to build a golf course to get rid of the town's wastewater. The Environmental Protection Agency went along with the plan, and Meadow Lakes Golf Course was constructed and opened in 1993.

The turf at Meadow Lakes appears as green as the grass on most any other golf course. There's no shortage of water

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Assistant superintendent Steve Reynolds says the extra nitrogen in the effluent has allowed the course to reduce fertilization to a single application on fairways and roughs.

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for irrigation. The course's irrigation system runs six hours to eight hours a night and spreads about 3,000 gallons of water a minute on the course, according to Steve Reynolds, the course's assistant superintendent.

"This has been a great thing for the city," Reynolds says.

The water-treatment plant is located about a half mile away. Solids and some salts are removed from the water by filtering before the water is dispersed to the irrigation pond.

While water bills are skyrocketing at some golf courses, Meadow Lakes only has to pay the cost of the electric to pump the effluent water.

However, getting rid of the wastewater can be challenging for a few reasons. For starters, there's a time crunch. The state's Department of Environmental Quality requires the course to irrigate the level-two effluent strictly at night when nobody is playing.

While the effluent water is not a health hazard, the course does not want golfers to come in contact with it for sanitary reasons. Signs around the course advise golfers to wash their hands after playing.

Having more than enough water to irrigate has impacted maintenance practices, Reynolds says.

"We're mowing more because we're watering more," he explains. "Effluent

**The Meadow Lakes are actually 10 ponds with impermeable membranes that were built to contain overflow effluent water.**

water has more nitrogen, which makes the grass grow faster. We have to stay on top of it, or it can get away from us easily. We're mowing fairways every day to keep from having a lot of clippings lying around."

Because of the extra nitrogen in the effluent, Reynolds says the course has been able to reduce fertilization to a single application on fairways and roughs annually. The reduction in fertilization also means less chance the fertilizer could end up in the river.

The trout-laden Crooked River running through the course is pristine and clean, Reynolds says. Extensive native vegetation, a buffer zone extending 50 feet in some areas, surrounds the river.

"It's what was here before the golf course was here — tall grass and willows," Reynolds says.

Regarding the course's name, the Meadow Lakes are actually 10 ponds with impermeable membranes that were built to contain overflow effluent water.

"They're fairly shallow, and they evaporate quickly," Reynolds says. "They're also great hazards, but players are advised to refrain from retrieving their balls from them." ■

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# Nothing **Short** of **Progress**

ClubCorp champions a new set of forward tees

**C**lubCorp is making its golf courses shorter and easier. Way shorter, less than 5,000 yards in most cases. What would inspire this stark contrast to the rest of the industry? The answer is member recruitment and retention, crucial components to growing the game.

In an effort to shorten rounds and offer more flexibility for beginning golfers, ClubCorp is installing far-forward tees as part of its Short Course Initiative.

It's no secret that golf demand is flat, and golf courses are closing faster than they are opening for the second-consecutive year. The biggest reasons, sources say, stem from time scarcity.

Thus far, the industry has responded to America's virtual time poverty by building longer, tougher golf courses, which largely have cannibalized shorter, easier layouts. That

trend has hampered rounds at public facilities. And private clubs are experiencing a shakeout, too. Fewer traditional country club members are willing to forgo weekends with family to golf as often as they did in the past.

"My father was an avid golfer. I can't imagine the amount of laughter that would have taken place if I asked him to give up his weekend golf to watch me play soccer," says Frank Gore, ClubCorp's executive vice president of membership and sales. "Conversely, my daughter played soccer for six years without ever scoring a goal, but I never missed a game. It's different now, and we saw a lot of this prioritizing what's important after 9/11."

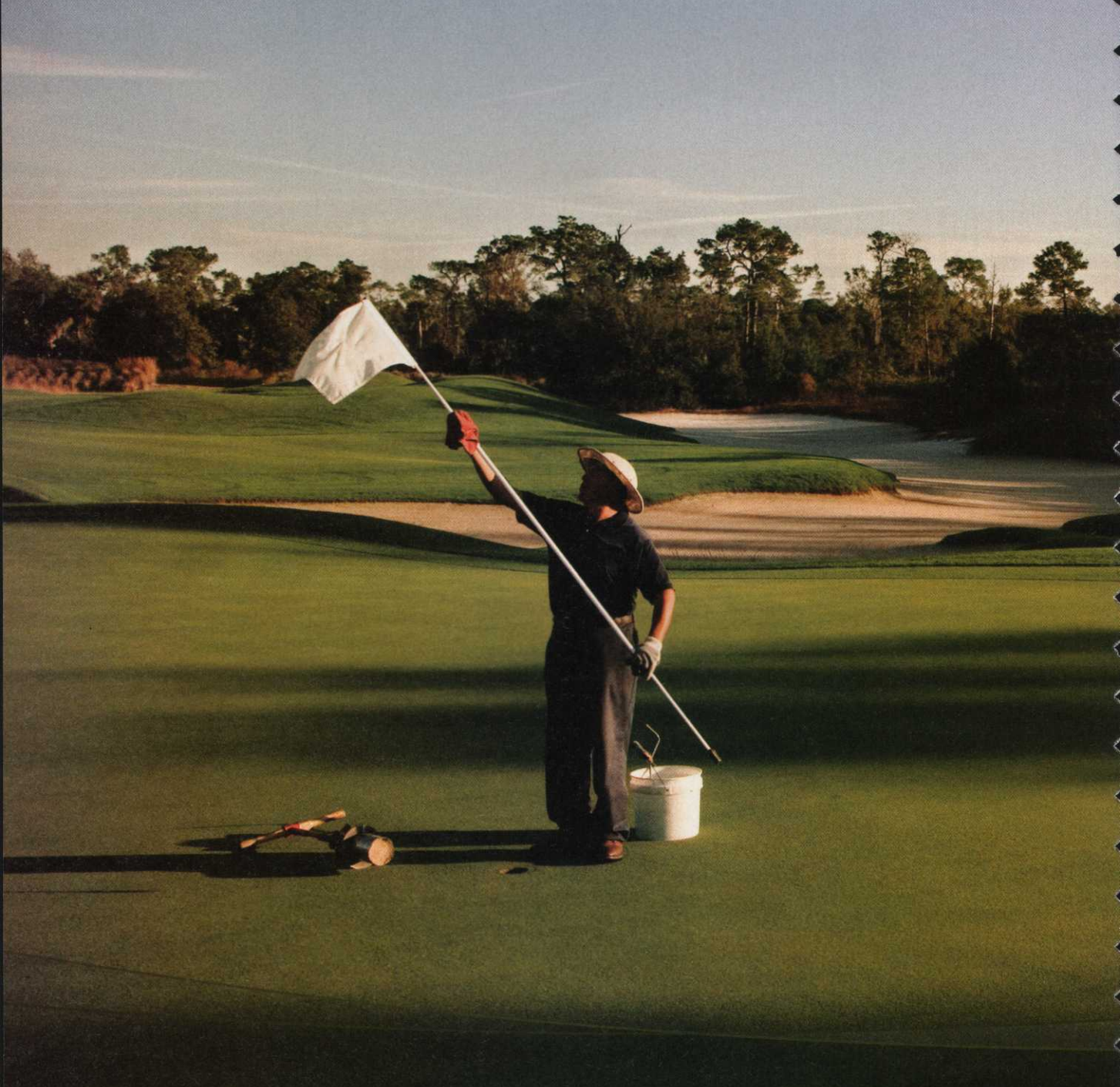
Indeed, golf was never better around the turn of the millennium. But its current slump has many industry observers wondering if it will ever return to its glory days. Myriad task forces, think tanks and even formal entities have been devising ways to grow

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ClubCorp will add far-forward tees to all of its golf holes, including this signature hole at the Island Course at The Clubs of Kingwood. Its Shores Course already features far-forward tees, family golf cars and two pins on each green (inset) to accommodate varying skill levels and help the pace of play.

**BY DAVID FRABOTTA**  
SENIOR EDITOR

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the game. The result has been a host of marketing initiatives, but the really big changes — like shaking the game of its traditional six-hour obligation — has been largely academic with the exception of a few golf courses.

That's about to change. This spring, more than 90 of ClubCorp's managed properties will offer a new set of forward tees, typically 100 yards closer to the green than the previous forward tees.

"We're trying to get people to play a nine-hole round in an hour and 15 minutes or less," Gore says. "It's not just for kids and for beginners. It's also for people with less time. You're basically playing a high-quality, 3-par course, which provides a combination of speed and lower difficulty."

With each year, more members are downgrading their memberships from golf memberships to less-expensive social memberships, Gore says. Of those who

keep their golf memberships, more of them are playing a mere 18 rounds to 24 rounds a year. That's about \$400 per round with dues. That's a tough sell considering the glut of upscale daily-fee or semi-private courses that opened in the past decade, most of which can be played for about \$100, depending on the market.

In an effort to reverse that trend, ClubCorp knows that members who regularly show up to use at least part of the club are more likely to retain their full memberships because they perceive more value in club amenities and facilities than infrequent users. Far-forward tees allow members to use the facility more often: Dad can play in about an hour after work and still attend evening obligations, or kids can play along with dad without holding up play. Both scenarios keep members coming to the club more often.

Only a big management company like ClubCorp can give a program like this a

national identity and help it root among average golfers, but the idea of forward tees is not new. In New Boston, Texas, The Oak Grove Golf Club, owned and operated by Jeff Prieskorn, has operated with kids' tees for almost a decade.

When Oak Grove hired golf course architect John Colligan to build a second nine and refurbish the original nine in 1998, Prieskorn thought it would be a good idea if his oldest son (now age 18) and his friends could have a place to golf without holding up the pace of play. So he installed tee boxes on the sides of fairways adjacent to landing areas used by golfers hitting from the traditional tees. He hid them with mounding so they wouldn't be a distraction from the back tees.

Eventually, the golf course's reputation grew as a kid-friendly place, and kids helped supplement historically slow tee times, mainly in the evenings.

"We have kids as young as 8 that play

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