

Golf Making Spectacular Impact On Brainerd Lakes Area Economy

By RALPH TURPINEN

An unprecedented golf boom is making a spectacular impact on the tourist industry in Central Minnesota — and it doesn't show any signs of slowing down.

For virtually the entire 20th Century, the Brainerd Lakes Area primarily captured national attention as a mecca for fishing and vacationing. But now, during the final decade of the 1900s, the new lure for attracting travelers is golf.

This isn't to say that fishing is a thing of the past. Heavens no! But it now has excellent company in attracting thousands of willing-to-spend golfers to the area's unusual variety of public and resort courses.

For the past eight years the Brainerd Lakes Area not only has witnessed the completion of three new, nationally-recognized golf courses, but two more are under construction, another is doubling its size and several others have added on to their existing nine holes or are doing considerable remodeling on their lodging as well as golf facilities.

"The impact of golf also filters through our local economy because of the dollars spent in off-golf course businesses," said Mark Ronnei, general manager of Grand View Lodge in Nisswa, which ignited the championship golf course boom when it began construction of The Pines in 1988. "Many lake homes have been built or purchased because of the quality and quantity of golf in our area."

"The addition of The Pines, The Preserve in Pequot Lakes, The Classic at Madden's and the new Ruttger's Lakes course impacts our local economy by 15 million dollars or more per year, and that is almost assuredly low," Ronnei said. "This includes money spent at the golf courses, lodging, meals and goods and services purchased by golfers and employees of the establishment."

Furthermore, he projects that "by the year 2000 we will have double the current impact that we see today."

Nineteen area golf courses in the area bordered by Vintage Golf Club in Staples in the west, The Preserve at Pequot Lakes in the north, Mille Lacs Golf Club in the east and Little Falls Country Club in the south — all less than 40 minutes from Brainerd — have jointly begun promoting the central Minnesota area as a principal golf destination — with a broad range of prices for golf, lodging and restaurants.

Golfers can spend less than \$10 for some nine-hole courses to upwards of \$100 for some of the more pricey designer layouts that already have captured national attention for their design, beauty and quality.

Although golf was played at such venerable resorts as Madden's, Breezy Point and Grand View Lodge in the

1920s, and at several new courses that began dotting the Central Minnesota landscape during the '30s and '40s, it really wasn't until 1988 when Fred Boos convinced co-owners to build The Pines at Grand View Lodge that the first of a series of "golf explosions" took place. The Pines immediately captured national attention — and significant honors — as did The Preserve, which it co-owns in Pequot Lakes, and The Classic, Madden's handsome new 18-hole championship addition to the 45 holes it already had available for play at the Gull Lake resort.

But the boom didn't stop there. Now 45 more holes are being built at Cragun's Resort on Gull Lake (*See story on Page 7*) with the first 18 scheduled to open September 11, according to Tom Kientzle, director of golf. He also said that test rounds were played in August. In addition, Deacon's Lodge, an Arnold Palmer-designed championship course is

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Golf Boom—

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a few wood shots north of Breezy Point.

What adds special sizzle is that nationally-recognized golf architects have become involved in the golf boom, such as Arnold Palmer at Deacon's Lodge, the 18-hole course named after his father and scheduled to open in 1999; Robert Trent Jones, Jr., designer of the 45-hole complex at Cragun's slated for full completion next year; former touring pros Joel Goldstrand at The Pines and Mike Morley at The Preserve, and George Harbottle, formerly on the staff of Pete Dye at Izaty's where nine more holes will be added to the present 18 this fall and nine more next year.

Meantime, several area courses have begun a variety of improvements on their courses, such as the new clubhouse at Ruttger's which this year is celebrating its 100th year as a resort at Bay Lake.

Crosswoods at Crosslake now has a new championship nine and new clubhouse added to its executive nine while The Vintage at Staples recently completed a major reshaping of 13 of 18 holes, added three miles of hard-surfaced cart paths and a completely remodeled clubhouse.

Irish Hills has added a new nine and is doing more remodeling in Jenkins while Whitefish Golf Club, now in its 30th year, is making good use of its new clubhouse and several renovated holes at Ideal Corners.

Pine Meadows has been upgrading its course in Brainerd for several years and, similarly, Fiddlestix at Isle has shown considerable progress since it became 18 holes four years ago.

Variety of Courses Appeal To Many Visitors

Indeed, the nationally-recognized courses have begun attracting more players from throughout Minnesota as well as bordering states and Canadian provinces as well as those a bit farther south like Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma where several summer Lake residents have encouraged friends to enjoy what Central Minnesota has to offer.

Moreover, what appeals to many visitors are the several modestly-priced courses where beginners and youngsters can play within 20 minutes from the designer layouts. In addition, virtually every course has a PGA golf professional trained to introduce newcomers to the game or to develop existing skills to make participation more enjoyable.

Veteran golf writer Don Peddie, of Edina and Breezy Point, who has been charting golf play in this region for seven years, says "the number of rounds per year has shown an average increase of 6% per year since 1991, with a high of 9% in 1994 and 8% last year.

"That's an increase of 35% in seven years, and it's bound

to grow more with the addition of the Palmer and Cragun's courses," Peddie said.

Meantime, resort and restaurant expansion has kept pace with the golf developments. A full range of prices is available, whether it's a couple of bucks for a burger and modest motels or top-shelf tabs for gourmet foods and lodging.

The Midwest, however, is just the beginning of this area's plans, both individually and collectively, to use golf as a vehicle to entice players from such states as Texas, Florida, Arizona and New Mexico to escape hot summers and enjoy what Central Minnesota has to offer.

Will the proliferation of courses help some and hurt others?

Naturally there will be competition for both the golf and resort dollars — but virtually all of the owners agree that what helps the area will help all of them as they promote the Brainerd Lakes area as a premier golf destination with its wide variety of places to play and stay.

For more information, contact Brainerd Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 356, Brainerd, MN 56401-0356, 1-800-450-2838, Fax: (218) 829-8199. E-mail: brndlake@uslink.net

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