

# Renovations Can Make Your Course More “User Friendly”

There are many small projects that may make your golf course more attractive to casual golfers.

BY ELLIOTT L. DOWLING

For many in the world of golf, the word *renovation* may as well be a four-letter word. Renovation has a negative connotation that registers with many people as inconvenience, expense, and even closure of the golf course. While one or more of these thoughts may be included in a project, smaller renovation projects can improve your facility with minimal cost and inconvenience.

The number of golfers has declined across the world compared to the height of golf participation in 2005. The recent decline of golf has been attributed to economic downturn and a change in golfing patterns. Interestingly, statistics gathered by the National Golf Foundation indicate that 260,000 women took up the game of golf in 2013, but this number was offset by nearly 650,000 men who quit playing golf that same year. These numbers emphasize the importance of introducing women to the game of golf.

There are numerous reasons cited for the decline in the number of golfers. Aside from economic decline affecting disposable income, other reasons players leave the game include time, difficulty, and lack of playing partners. These three reasons tie into a common theme: Golf courses are just too difficult.

Golf is supposed to be enjoyable. For the vast majority of core golfers, the game is fun. For those we should target to increase participation, i.e., new players, women, children, and seniors, difficult golf courses and better players can be intimidating. Course officials can help address these concerns by making the golf course user friendly to improve the golf experience for a wider range of players.



*Increasing the size of your practice facility and providing a variety of shot options is a great way to increase player satisfaction. Providing adequate space in a more forgiving setting ensures everyone has the opportunity to practice shots they may encounter on the course.*



*Incorporating artificial mats into your practice facility provides an all-weather, year-round surface to hit from. Installing mats is a great way to disperse traffic and accommodate large volumes of play during the busiest time of the golf season.*



*Ideally, practice tees can be enlarged to accommodate more golfers. Tees such as this are “over built” to ensure plenty of room is available for players. Large teeing surfaces also allow the facility to provide additional features such as covered areas to hit from, club-cleaning stations, and benches.*

How are renovations related to a better golf experience? There are several projects, varying in size and scope, that can be implemented to potentially make a golf course more enjoyable for novice or less-skilled golfers without decreasing the enjoyment for accomplished golfers. Furthermore, renovation does not have to be a major project. For a period of time, renovation and construction projects were focused on attracting skilled golfers when the focus probably should have been on attracting new players to the game. However, there are several examples of large and small renovations that can attract new golfers and enhance the golf experience for everyone.

### PRACTICE FACILITIES

Improving practice facilities is a major renovation trend. Providing adequate space to practice a variety of shots provides new players and those intimidated by the golf course with an area to improve their skills. Golfers who are not enjoying the game often cite their skill level as a major factor affecting their enjoyment. The best way to improve your skill set in any discipline is practice, and new golfers often feel more comfortable at the practice facility than on the golf course. Another notable trend among all groups of

golfers is an increasing amount of practice.

Golfers may not have enough time to play nine or 18 holes, but they have enough time to practice chipping, putting, or various shots at the driving range. Upgrades to practice facilities can allow more players to be accommodated and provide a better practice experience.

Practice area renovations have often focused on increasing

practice-tee size. As mentioned above, the decrease in rounds played is not translating to a decrease in practice. Increasing the size of your practice tee can allow your facility to accommodate more players and disperse traffic across a larger area. Installing artificial mats can be an effective way to increase teeing surface. Although artificial mats are not perceived to be ideal by many facilities, they provide an all-weather, year-round surface to hit from. Improving the accessibility of practice tees is important to facilities that are experiencing an increase in practice relative to rounds of golf played.

Improving practice areas is well directed, but the golf course is often where the greatest return on investment from renovation can be realized. A golf course that is overly difficult may struggle to attract new players. Remember, average golfers are not skilled golfers, but they enjoy posting good scores.

### FORWARD TEES

The length of golf holes, specifically the distance from tee to fairway, is often a primary concern for beginning golfers. In the late 1900s and early 2000s, tee additions were done for the purpose of lengthening golf courses to add difficulty. The beginnings of fair-



*Fairway landing zones are often constructed with the better-than-average players in mind and can inadvertently penalize high-handicap players. Evaluate fairway widths at distances where less-skilled players may land. Widening fairways is often a simple, inexpensive proposition that pays enormous dividends.*



*In effort to attract new players to your facility, consider converting areas of rough to fairway turf closer to the teeing grounds. Doing so increases the chance players of all skill levels will reach the fairway.*



*Installing chipping areas around greens provides additional design features and variability for recovery shots. For many players, successfully hitting a delicate wedge shot onto a green is difficult. If chipping areas are present, players have options that were once unavailable.*

ways were often converted to rough to further increase the challenge. The goal of these changes was to attract the low-handicap golfer. Unfortunately, there just aren't that many skilled golfers with single-digit handicaps to attract when compared to the number of casual, high-handicap golfers. In recent years, many courses have added forward tees to provide new golfers with a better opportunity to reach fairways, thereby increasing their enjoyment of the golf course as they learn the game. The addition of forward tees does not have to be expensive, and they can make the game more enjoyable for the players who need to use them.

### **FAIRWAY WIDTHS AND HAZARDS**

Courses that are too difficult often have narrow fairways and an excessive number of bunkers and/or water hazards that inadvertently affect the high-handicap golfer and slow play. Too often the intended landing zone widens slightly to accept a well-struck golf shot, but the fairway leading to the landing area is narrow. The result is an inadvertently difficult landing zone. Evaluate the width of fairways relative to the intended landing zone for golfers of different skill levels. Increasing fairway width in landing zones for less-skilled golfers is not an expensive proposition, but this simple change can help the average golfer.

The same is often true of bunker placement. Sand bunkers are often the most difficult hazards to recover from for the average golfer. On older and classic golf courses, fairway bunkers are often in positions where better players simply hit over them. However, these bunkers inordinately penalize the less-skilled player who is least prepared to play from them. Sometimes the onus is on the golfer to play from the proper set of tees, but relocating or removing bunkers that penalize less-skilled golfers just makes sense.

A few steep, over-your-head bunkers are fun, but numerous difficult bunkers on every hole may discourage new players and force them to play elsewhere rather than draw them to your facility. Bunker design and location should coincide with golfer skill. Deep, difficult fairway bunkers are appropriate if set at distances where they affect only the best players, not if they often penalize the high-handicap golfer. Evaluate bunkers that affect players who hit shorter distances. If they are difficult to play from, consider softening the bunkers or removing them altogether.

### **CHIPPING AREAS**

A good way to add design features to your course and give players of various skill levels different shot options is the installation of chipping areas around green complexes. These areas are

typically mowed out from the green at fairway height.

Rather than having to delicately use a wedge to lift the ball quickly from the rough and stop abruptly on the putting surface, chipping areas can provide players with different options. Rather than delicate wedge shots, golfers may be able to roll the ball up to the green from chipping areas with a putter, hybrid club, or iron. Better golfers can still use the flop shot if they feel comfortable, but chipping areas give the average golfer more options.

### **CONCLUSION**

Renovations do not necessarily mean great inconvenience to the golfers or great expense. Rather, there are many small projects that may make your golf course more attractive to casual golfers without affecting the challenge for better players. Evaluate the golf course objectively for players of different skill levels. The goal is to grow the game, not necessarily make it easier. However, new players need options to improve their skills. More and more golf courses are looking at strategies to make their courses attractive and enjoyable to golfers of all skill levels, and some of the projects discussed above can potentially be part of the process.

**ELLIOTT DOWLING** is an agronomist in the USGA Green Section's Mid-Atlantic Region.