

Practice Makes Sustainable

Investing in practice facilities benefits the golfer and the business.

BY DAVID KUYPERS

“Practice? Practice??? We’re talking about practice? I mean, we’re talking about . . .

PRACTICE!?” The speaker was a well-known professional basketball player. The object of his scorn was, obviously, practice, and the contempt in which he held it was apparent to all. His ire had been raised by the fact that his employer wanted him, in return for the millions of dollars that they paid him, to attend and participate in practice.

Some golfers are completely obsessed with practicing while others simply can’t stand it. The dislike of practice can be blamed on any number of sources. Practice can be boring, the game can be humbling, and, most concerning for the golf industry, practice can be unproductive. After all, lack of improvement is often cited as a key reason why golfers give up the game. A bad practice facility is another common reason why players may not enjoy practicing. Practice areas were an afterthought when early golf courses were designed. Maintenance costs, limited space, and construction expense are common reasons why existing practice facilities may be mediocre and/or why renovations have not occurred. Over the last decade, however, things have changed. A good practice facility now represents an area where existing golfers can improve their game and is frequently a determining factor when prospective players/members choose between facilities. More important, practice facilities provide a comfortable opportunity to introduce new players to the game and teach them necessary skills and etiquette, creating a whole new group of players — and customers. These factors were evaluated when Cutten Fields Golf Club considered the potential renovation and expansion of its practice facilities.



Practice has become an important part of modern golf.



Practice areas are invaluable to introducing kids and new players to the game.

Cutten Fields Golf Club is a private golf facility located in Guelph, Ontario, about 90 minutes west of Toronto. It is a growing city of 130,000, home to the University of Guelph and many agriculture, technology, and manufacturing businesses. The membership has been steadily growing in the past few years.

WHAT IS PRACTICE AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Practice is largely misunderstood. In the book *Talent is Overrated*, Geoff Colvin identifies amateur golfers as a group that typically misunderstand and misuse practice. Often, amateurs may spend a significant amount of time (and money) “practicing” without realizing any improvement on the golf course because the practice that they

have designed — usually repeatedly hitting balls, often with a flawed swing, under circumstances that are different from those on the golf course — does not translate into any improvement in performance. Frustration ensues, leading the player to realize less enjoyment and satisfaction from the game or to give up the game entirely. Again, this situation, manifested on an industry-wide level as “failure to improve,” is cited as a key factor for players leaving the game. This problem must be addressed by the industry in order to retain a larger percentage of players that begin to play.

Expertise in the mechanics of a golf swing is rarely something golfers possess. A valuable practice regime can be created with the help of a golf professional, who can identify the

areas that need to be adjusted and help monitor the improvements. A facility that allows for many types of shots to be practiced is the next step.

At Cutten Fields Golf Club, these challenges have been identified as potential threats to the health of the business. The club has added many new members over the past number of seasons through effective and innovative programs like “Learn-to-Golf” memberships. These programs have brought many new members to the club and, more important, brought potential new players to the game. Further study of this group confirmed that there was a desire to improve golfing ability as well as overcome various challenges. There was a sense among the new players that everyone who played golf at a private club was



The expanded practice tee is large enough to provide many hitting stations for the membership with enough space to allow divots to heal before the area is used again.



Many putting greens at Cutten Fields are accessible by landing the ball on the approach and having it run onto the surface. The new practice facility allows players to work on these types of shots.

an exceptional player, which is not always the case. There was also an intimidation factor in that golf at a private club was perceived to be a form of a “secret society” replete with its own language, rituals, and etiquette. An improved practice facility could address all of these issues for new members and players. New practice facilities would provide a place to learn, from a qualified professional, in a landscape that was similar to what would be experienced on the golf course, while becoming familiar with the etiquette and rules of the game in an environment that is intended for learning and improving.

WHAT ABOUT THE CURRENT MEMBERS?

Improved practice facilities will also provide for the current members and the better players at the club. The improved facilities could be a place for the better players to improve their games and provide an activity that was potentially less time-consuming than playing nine or 18 holes. The time that it takes to play the game was another threat that the club had identified to gaining/keeping new players. Typically, good players invest a significant amount of time playing and practicing. In the modern world, time required to play golf may be limited, but a short practice session could be possible.

THE PRACTICE FACILITY

Once it had been determined that practice facilities could play a key role in attracting and keeping new members and players, while increasing the satis-

faction and enjoyment of the current membership, it became obvious that our existing facilities were not able to meet the demands for the practice area. The old practice area consisted of a two-tiered practice tee approximately 10,000 square feet in size and a 1,500-square-foot chipping green with two bunkers. The practice tee was too small to allow adequate recovery time before a given area was back in use again. Turf quality was often less than ideal. The practice green was too small and not suited to practice bump-and-run shots, which are often a great option for approach shots on many holes at Cutten Fields. The bunkers were opposite each other, so a shot that flew over the small green would go into the opposite bunker, meaning that it was not safe to practice from both bunkers at the same time. There were some positives to the existing facilities. They were located close to the golf shop and easily accessible without a golf cart, and the area was also adjacent to a substantial piece of unused land that could be incorporated into a larger facility.

The club’s architect, Ian Andrew, was tasked to design a practice facility that would replicate different shots encountered on the golf course while maximizing the area available for practice to accommodate increased golfer demand. Additionally, the facility was laid out so a three-hole short course could be used for instruction, junior clinics, and special events. The new facility utilized the entire seven acres available, increased the practice tee to 27,000 square feet, created three

greens for putting, chipping, or pitch shots of less than 90 yards, and included a one-acre fairway. New practice bunkers and multiple short-grass areas replicating the areas found on the golf course were also included in the design.

CONCLUSION

Cutten Fields Golf Club recognized that many opportunities could be created by improved practice facilities. In their golf market, an improved practice facility could enhance the value that the current members realized from their investment. Likewise, prospective members would be more likely to join a club with quality practice facilities, and new players would be less likely to leave if their games showed improvement. The area would also be attractive to members who had time constraints or desired an area to play or practice with young or junior players. By investing in an improved and expanded practice area, the game — and the club — would be more attractive to a broader range of existing and future golfers in the area, increasing the ability of the club to sustain its current viability.

LITERATURE CITED

Colvin, G. 2008. *Talent is Overrated*. Penguin Group. New York, NY.

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