

# The Long and Short of Practice Areas

*Practice facilities come in all different shapes and sizes. Some basic design and management considerations can make practice ranges and short game areas safe, practical, and enjoyable.*

by **DARIN S. BEVARD**

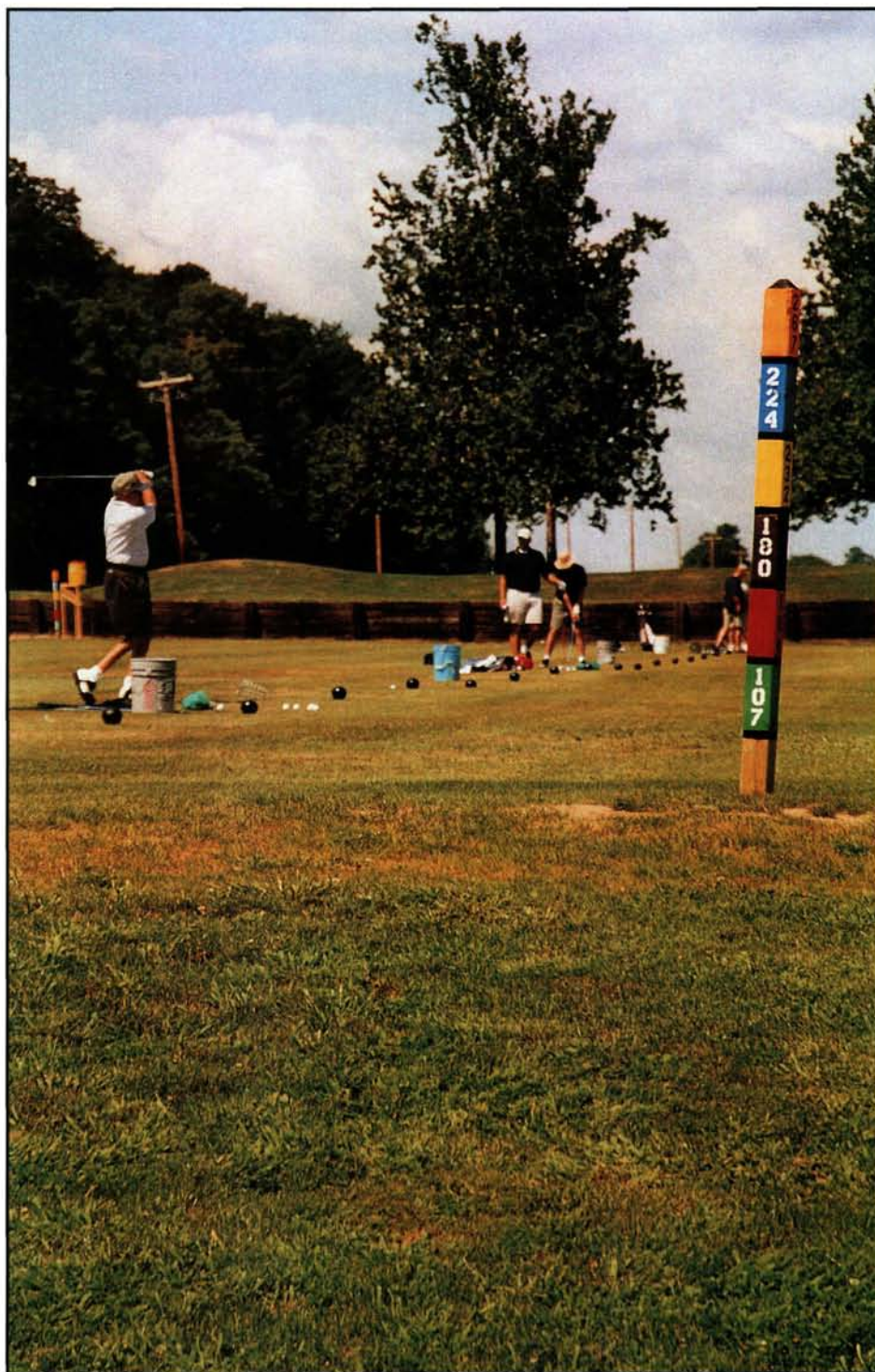
**A**H . . . THE PERFECT golf shot. Nothing feels quite like it. Now if I could only hit that perfect golf shot again, on purpose. This is a common refrain among many of us who love and play the game of golf. In fact, the perfect shot is what keeps us coming back.

Most golfers realize that in order to improve their games and lower their handicaps, repetition of the golf swing in the various aspects of the game is extremely important. However, most people don't have the 4 to 4½ hours needed to play a round of golf or even 2 hours to get in nine holes on a regular basis. This means that golfers must find time during lunch to hit a few chips and putts or head to the range before dinner to hit the all-important *bucket of balls* in an effort to hone their golf skills.

Golf has become a game of practice. With more than 26 million people participating in the game of golf, practice facilities will continue to be in demand for the public course and private club player. There are well over 16,000 golf courses in the United States, and most have some type of practice area. In fact, the practice facility can be crucial in attracting customers and prospective members. By combining the number of golf courses with player demand, it is easy to see that practicing golf is big business itself!

This begs the question: What makes a good practice range and short-game facility? The answer is somewhat subjective. Let's just say it would be difficult to list every factor that impacts the quality of a good practice facility. However, there are several major factors that likely define the overall quality of a practice facility.

The best practice facilities incorporate a practice range that allows players to work on their long game, while including a putting green and chipping area close by. Players need to practice putting, chipping, and even hitting bunker shots. There are certain features of each type of practice area



*A well-marked target area on the practice range is a benefit to the golfers using the facility. This range uses a series of colored stakes to indicate the corresponding distance off of the tee.*



*With the game of golf more popular than ever, practice areas are becoming a major feature of the golf course landscape (Alpine C.C., New Jersey).*

(practice range and short-game areas) that add to golfers' enjoyment. This article will focus on the factors that influence the quality of practice facilities, starting with practice ranges and moving on to practice putting greens and short-game areas.

### **Practice Ranges**

Several major factors should be considered when evaluating the overall quality of a practice range. They include the size of the tee and landing area, tee surface (turf vs. artificial mats), quality of range targets, location, and overall presentation. This also includes distance markers and teeing area definition.

### **Size Requirements**

Perhaps the most important factor in determining the overall quality of a practice range is its size. The size of the range tee has a direct impact on the golf course superintendent's ability to maintain high quality grass, as well as the number of people who can use the practice range at a given time. The size of the landing area and its relation to surrounding areas affects many things, with safety being the most important.

The size of a practice range is usually dictated by available space. Many older golf courses didn't consider the need for a practice range at the time they were designed. When they were built, golf was a different

game. As such, these older courses often only have small driving ranges, if one exists at all. As older courses are renovated and/or restored, one area that is often reviewed is the potential for expanding the existing practice range, or building a new practice complex in a different area. Some older golf courses have even purchased adjacent parcels of land in order to construct a modern practice range. For new courses, however, the emphasis currently placed on practice dictates that such facilities should be designed in the overall scheme of the golf course.

So how big does a practice range, including tees, need to be? This is a difficult question to answer. Factors such as the number of annual rounds and public versus private membership must be considered. Many ranges are no larger than 5 or 6 acres, but they still can provide a high quality practice area. However, these small facilities rely on natural barriers such as trees, safety nets, golf club restrictions, and golfer awareness to maintain safety. Intense maintenance of the turfgrass is also needed to provide quality conditions under heavy traffic.

Where space is available, a rather nice range can be built on about 15 acres. This may sound like a lot of land, but it only provides a range approximately 320 yards in length and 150 yards in width, with room for some two acres of teeing space. In fact,

some practice ranges are more than 20 acres in size when short-game areas are included, although this is the exception and not the rule. In discussions with architects, 15 acres plus or minus a couple of acres seems to be a good starting point.

It is hard to determine how large the tee must be to provide adequate teeing space for any given practice range under all circumstances. Intensity of traffic and maintenance will impact the quality of the tee. However, a larger teeing area that provides room for more players to practice at any given time is desirable. This is especially important during times of peak activity. Additionally, the more room available to distribute traffic, the better chance the golf course superintendent will have to maintain a quality stand of grass on the tee. Within reason, practice tees should be constructed as large as available space and resources permit. We never see practice tees that are too large!

One very good way to maximize teeing space is to construct tees at both ends of the range. In many instances, the tee closest to the clubhouse is used for players to warm up for their round of golf, while the tee at the far end of the range is used for hardcore practice and lessons. It is important to have adequate space between the two tees to prevent balls hit at one end of the range from hitting players on the other end of the range.

## Grass Selection

When planning a practice range, anticipated tee size will have a major impact on grass selection for the practice tees. Other factors also affect the turfgrass species that is selected for a practice tee. In many instances, attempts are made to match fairway turf type with the base turf on the practice tee, but this is not always the best approach. Rather, the turfgrass species that performs the best and recovers the quickest under the climatic conditions of a given region should be selected as the base turf. Otherwise, maintaining high quality turf can be next to impossible. Generally, in the South, bermudagrass is the grass of choice for practice tees, while creeping bentgrass or perennial ryegrass performs well in northern climates. Of course, in spite of the best available agronomic information, turf selection may come down to the desires of the powers-that-be to have a certain turfgrass species in place, even though its management may be more difficult.

## Maintenance

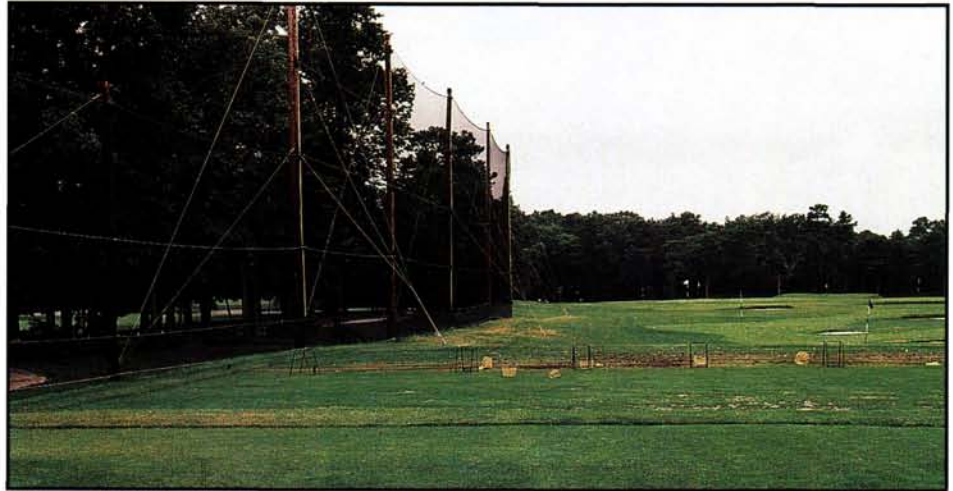
Practice tees must be intensively maintained if top quality surface conditions are the goal. Frequent rotation of the tee markers reduces concentrated wear injury from occurring. Regular aeration, topdressing, overseeding of divots, and generous fertilization are crucial. As soon as an area is taken out of use due to wear on a cool-season tee, it should be heavily overseeded and topdressed to keep the surface level and encourage turf recovery. For warm-season grasses the decision to overseed will depend on the time of year. However, topdressing remains important. Maintaining high levels of fertility on both warm- and cool-season grasses is necessary to promote turf recovery. An application of as much as 1 lb. of actual nitrogen per 1,000 sq. ft. per month from a combination of readily available and slow-release nitrogen sources is not excessive. A regimented maintenance schedule should be adhered to. Regular maintenance also should include frequent mowing and rotation of the hitting area to provide good turf conditions while preventing excessive wear in any one place.

Reliable irrigation is also an important part of practice tee maintenance. While standard overhead sprinklers can work well, we see more and more

pop-up mist heads being installed. These smaller heads allow the tees to be watered when golfers are present, with less chance of splashing anyone with water. A good irrigation system is crucial for germinating seed and maintaining quality turf.

## All-Weather Tees

In spite of having the best available turf and adequate teeing space, it is becoming increasingly necessary to install artificial teeing surfaces in order to allow ranges to remain open under adverse weather conditions. All-weather tees provide the oppor-



*Where available space for the practice range is limited, install netting to provide a barrier to the rest of the golf course and promote player safety.*

tunity for the turf to recover from wear while also allowing the practice range to be used when the grass tees are too wet, during the winter months when turf is dormant, during outings, or when time is needed for renovations.

It is very important to carefully scrutinize the choices when selecting an artificial surface. Many clubs have installed artificial tees only to remove them because of player dissatisfaction or maintenance problems. Often, a variety of artificial teeing surfaces can be found at local clubs. Questions regarding maintenance of artificial tees (yes, some artificial tees require varying amounts of maintenance to be their best) should be asked. Artificial tees often represent a large capital investment. Many different surfaces can and should be tested prior to making a commitment.

## Landing Areas

Many different design options exist for practice range landing areas. Some players desire to have a fancy landing area where target greens are accented

with bunkers, actual fairway conditions are imitated, and the feeling of playing a regular golf hole are presented to the player. All of these features offer the chance for a spectacular appearance for a practice range. But are they really necessary? Probably not. A less expensive, less elaborate approach can be taken. So what is necessary?

First, landing areas should be contoured so players can see their balls land for all clubs that will be used. This is a very important consideration; the only way that distance and ball flight can be accurately gauged is to

see the ball land. Accurate and visible markers in the landing area need to be correlated with specific spots on the practice tee to provide yardage. Finally, target greens provide a nice touch to the landing area. They set off the target for the player and make practice seem more realistic. Something as simple as a pushed-up mound of soil with good turf cover and a flagstick can be used, up to a more elaborate setup such as the one mentioned above, with bunkers and on-course conditions. The bottom line is that the player needs to be able to see where the ball goes and accurately determine how far the ball traveled to maximize the benefits of practice.

## Maintenance

The degree of maintenance for practice range landing areas varies widely. Oftentimes, resources are better used on the actual golf course, not the practice range. However, the landing area should be mowed at least twice weekly. An irrigation system improves the appearance of the range and is



*Sand accumulation from repeated bunker practice can make maintenance difficult around the bunker and on the adjacent green. If a separate green is not provided for bunker practice, the sand accumulation can negatively impact putting green conditions. The appearance of the area can also be an eyesore, especially if it is close to the clubhouse area.*

becoming a standard feature across the country. Obviously, more elaborate landing areas require more intensive maintenance practices.

### **Short-Game Areas and Practice Putting Greens**

For short-game practice, two distinct components of the game are involved. Putting and pitch/chip shots, including bunker play, make up the majority of short-game practice. Ideally, a separate area should exist for each type of practice. Using the same practice green for putting and short-game practice, beyond very short greenside pitch shots, can lead to safety and turf maintenance problems. Again, the all-important issue of size is a major factor in the quality that can be achieved for short-game practice areas. Working with a golf course architect who is experienced in the design of short-game areas is a wise investment.

For practice putting greens, larger size allows more room to spread traffic and distribute hole locations to prevent turf thinning and wear pattern development. For chipping and pitching areas, adequate size is needed to allow multiple players to practice with minimal concern about safety. When players are close together, there is a greater chance that someone is going to get hit with a bladed or shanked chip or pitch shot. After all, the penchant for hitting poor shots is why the practice area is being used in the

first place! Errant shots should be expected.

### **Practice Putting Green**

The amount of space needed to maintain a high quality practice green varies, depending upon traffic levels, growing environment, and management strategies. For example, a small green with heavy traffic, located in an area of poor air movement and shade, and maintained under low fertility will most certainly fail. However, that same green located in an open area

with full sunlight and adequate fertility may perform well. Putting greens are often located in the shadow of the clubhouse or among trees. In these situations, a larger green is needed to provide a better opportunity for successful management. Larger size can compensate for a poor location.

Even under low traffic stress, a minimum of 10,000 sq. ft. should be provided to allow the grass to heal between hole rotations in and out of an area. Under high traffic conditions, the practice green should be constructed as large as available space and resources allow to ensure top quality conditions. Practice bunkers should not be located adjacent to the main practice putting green. This can lead to maintenance problems from repeated blasting of sand onto the putting green. Greenside bunker practice should be included in the chipping/pitching practice area, rather than at the putting green.

When planning a practice green, it is best to limit severe contours, especially if use will be heavy. Steep contours eliminate usable areas that are needed for hole locations and distribution of wear. The grassing scheme should be similar to that of the other greens on the golf course, if possible. This helps to promote consistency for the player.

### **Maintenance**

Normally, maintenance of practice putting greens should be similar to that of the greens on the golf course.



*Many golfers consider artificial teeing areas sacrilegious, but a properly installed all-weather surface can provide a rest for the natural grass tee. The use of improperly installed or poorly performing artificial tees may be short-lived if players become dissatisfied.*

This helps to ensure consistency between the practice green and the regular greens. Regular aeration and topdressing are very important to maintain good turf quality. However, it may be necessary to increase fertility on practice greens above the level used on the regular golf course greens. The levels of traffic that practice greens receive dictate that more fertilizer may be necessary to promote recovery from wear. Hole locations on practice greens should be moved frequently to prevent wear areas from developing. Frequency of rotation will depend upon the amount of traffic received from day to day. However, the holes should be changed at least frequently enough so that a clean hole with proper dimensions is maintained for practice. For heavily used greens, the use of target stakes, rather than actual holes, is becoming more common. These target stakes can be moved very easily, making frequent rotation more practical.

### Short-Game Area

Designing and building a short-game area can be tricky. While practicing, players will be in close proximity to one another, and often close to other areas of the golf course. Safety efforts must be ensured in these areas. Again, the best safety feature is adequate space and a thoughtful design.

Short-game areas vary from a small fairway approach with a target green, to more elaborate fairway areas of up to 100 yards in length. Ideally, fairway approach areas will be available from

several different directions to provide room for a number of players to practice at one time. What's right for a given facility will depend on available space as well as available capital for construction and maintenance. Usually, the green associated with a short-game area is maintained similarly to the practice putting green. However, maintenance does not need to be as intense for surface conditions. This green should be used primarily for chip and pitch shots from longer distances, not for practice putting. Nonetheless, this green should be well constructed and properly maintained.

In addition to a fairway approach area, bunkers should be installed to provide an area for short- to medium-range bunker practice.

### Integrating the Practice Area with the Golf Course

The overall integration of the entire practice complex with the rest of the golf course is very important. The starter will have an easier time of rounding up players if the practice areas are close to the golf course. Ideally, the practice tee and the practice putting green should be as close as possible to the first tee, but not in such a place that they cause a distraction to players teeing off. Having a clock at the practice complex is also a nice touch. This way, players can conveniently practice as their scheduled starting time approaches. Everyone likes to get in that last bit of practice prior to teeing up.

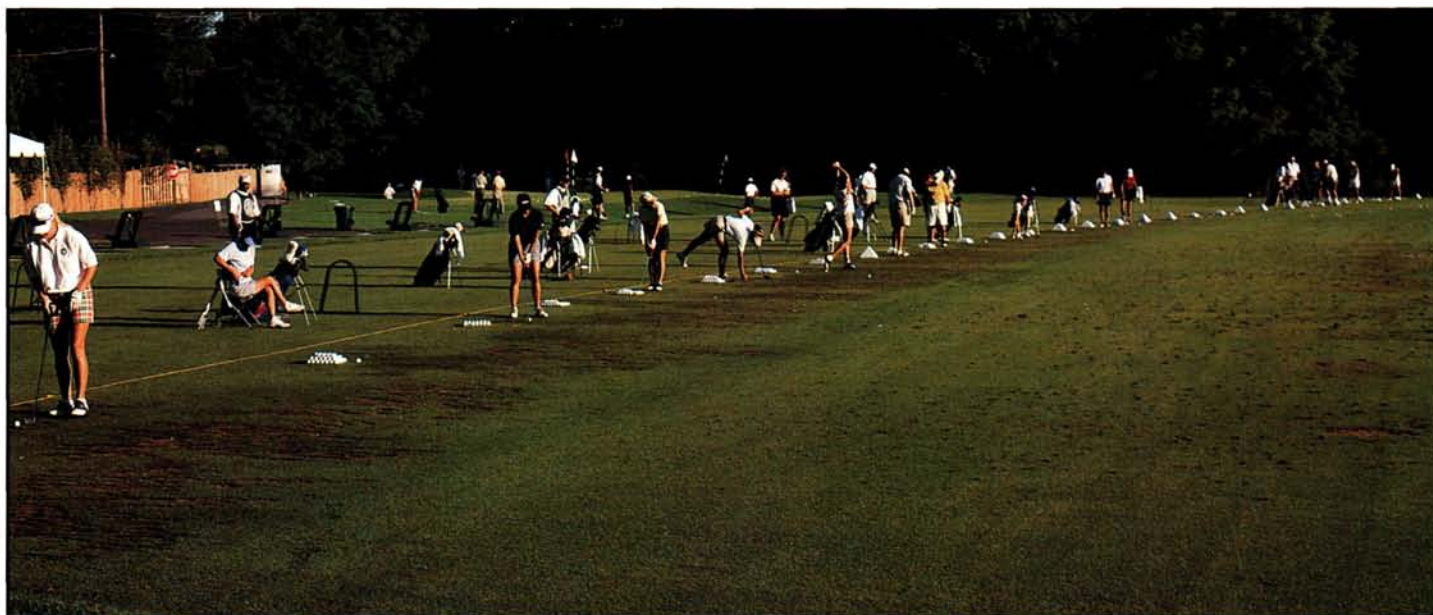
The short-game practice area frequently is isolated from other areas for safety reasons. A bladed sand wedge or thin pitch shot could pose a safety threat if any people are nearby. Safety should always be a consideration when designing practice areas.

For all areas of a practice facility, it is important to define what can and can't be done in the interest of safety. For example, if the range is only 75 yards wide and 200 yards long and runs parallel to a fairway or public road, it probably would be best to limit club selection to irons. This will reduce the chance for injuries.

It is difficult to cover all aspects of practice facility development and management that will be encountered in all situations, but the major issues are fairly consistent from golf course to golf course. Although the number of actual golfers has not grown significantly in the last 10 years, the desire to practice has grown. Golfers practice frequently in order to maintain and improve their overall skills. Keeping in mind the need for adequate size and safety should lead to a high quality practice facility that is properly integrated with the rest of the golf course, providing an excellent opportunity for practice.

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A large practice tee provides ample space for many players to practice at once prior to teeing off at the 1999 USGA Girls' Junior Amateur.