

# GOLF FOR ALL

No longer an elitist sport, golf contributes to the community and the environment.



**AT CRANBERRY HIGHLANDS GOLF COURSE IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA,**

golf balls aren't the only things flying through the air. In fact, more commonly identified flying objects might be birds, including owls, hawks, and bluebirds, as well as butterflies and bats. Deer, small mammals, and fish also make their home among the 332 acres at the site.

Cranberry Highlands has so much wildlife and nature to show, Superintendent Dave Barber created a walking trail in the spring of 2009 for the community to enjoy the surroundings. Jon Shuster, manager of golf operations for the course, says that the course only takes up about 190 acres, leaving the rest as open green space for the community to enjoy.

"In that green space are protected wetland areas, as well as the nature trail and large pieces of woods," Shuster explains. "Why not provide green space that brings value to the community and provides another recreational opportunity?"

Cranberry Highlands is not the only course that is getting creative about how they communicate about and showcase a golf course. The sport has been battling misperceptions for years: that courses are a drain on the environment, that the sport itself is for a privileged few, and that municipal courses are a thorn in the local economy's side.



“Those perceptions are certainly still out there,” says Rhett Evans, chief operating officer at the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. “It comes from the media a lot of times. TV commercials of gated communities around courses, rich people watching the PGA tour—these things have created the perception that this is an elitist sport, and it just isn’t true.”

Today, research shows that golf is not being played at only private country clubs. In fact, of the 16,000 golf courses across the country, 2,300 are municipal courses, 8,000 are daily fee courses, and 1,200 are considered semi-private, meaning they are at a resort. That means 74 percent of the nation’s courses are open to the public.

In addition, the once-distinct line between the

quality of a public course versus a private course is blurring. Chad Ritterbusch, executive director of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, says that he has seen dramatic improvements in the management of golf courses in the last 30 years. “Golf has become a much better operated business in both private and public courses,” he says. “Many years ago you found courses that were not as stimulating as today’s are. And I think that public courses are now providing a ‘private experience.’”

In addition, Ritterbusch says that golf course architects are taking on tough community challenges in a creative way, designing courses that sit on Superfund sites, old landfills, or blighted areas. “Right outside my office window is a course called Westmoor Country Club [in Wisconsin] that used soil for

its renovations from a Department of Transportation project in downtown Milwaukee,” explains Ritterbusch. “The city needed a place to dump the excess soil, and the golf course provided that solution.”

### GOLF GOES GREEN

So how does the sport combat some of these misperceptions? Perhaps the easiest win has been to showcase golf’s green side. Steve Mona, CEO of the World Golf Foundation, says, “Golf course superintendents are environmentalists and are in the industry because of their love of the environment.” He adds that superintendents need to balance the expectations golfers have for the course, but also how to make the course friendliest for the environment.

“Over the past years we have been educating golfers on what good playing conditions really are, and I think golfers are more accepting of a more natural look on a course as long as it doesn’t affect their play,” he says.

Evans agrees that golf superintendents naturally have a green streak, and says that sustainable practices in golf will only continue. “Managers and superintendents are great land users and professionally trained to manage the land,” he says. “In

reality, it is only the tees and greens that are highly maintained. Most of the land at a golf course is low-maintenance areas where managers are actually preserving wetlands, forests, and streams.”

Another way in which golf courses are conserving resources is through water use. Evans points to new technology like water sensors that allow irrigation systems to only water when needed. It not only saves water, but also saves money.

“Sustainability is the buzzword, but at the end of the day, it’s much more than just the planet,” Evans explains. “It’s the 3 Ps—planet, people, and profit. All three legs of that stool have to be sturdy, so you



(Above, below, and previous page) With the actual golf course taking up just 190 of the site’s 332 acres, Cranberry Highlands provides ample wildlife habitat and even a nature trail.





have to see what you can afford and what your resources are. If you can help the environment and it helps you remain profitable, then do it. Take one bite out of the elephant rather than trying to swallow the whole thing.”

### INCREASING ACCESSIBILITY

Not only are today’s golf courses trending greener, but they are trying to attract a broader audience. In the past decade, women have been the largest growing demographic in the sport, in part because of industry-wide initiatives to open the sport up to those who have never played.

Programming on the course, including lessons, clinics, group classes, and tournaments have exposed new players to the game. Mona says that most golf courses can be configured to accommodate both the beginner and expert golfer.

He explains, “You can have golfers play at different lengths, or you configure the tees differently. Create different angles and force golfers to play a particular way.”

At Cranberry Highlands, Shuster’s course partners with the Cranberry Township Department of Parks and Recreation to provide programs for youth and course access during day camps. He also holds an open house every year that is widely attended by the community and invites scout troops to try the nature trail and course.

Ritterbusch says that with a little land, “any park and recreation official who wants to preserve that green space and provide a recreational opportunity” could create a course. He gives the example of a course outside Milwaukee called Doyne Park on which he used to play with his own kids.

“It was probably constructed for next to nothing—it is nine holes and can’t be more than 25 acres,” he explains. “But this course has provided an avenue for people to learn about the game and for families to take their kids out to golf. They hit the ball around and try it out—people are having a wonderful time out there.”

In addition, he agrees with Mona that an existing course can be made to accommodate a beginning golfer. “You can design a course with all players in mind,” he says. “Architects can place bunkers in a particular way that it might look intimidating, but it’s easier than it looks. Or water hazards that force golfers to get the ball up in the air can be removed so beginner golfers can play through.”

## Singing STICKS FOR KIDS Praises

By Annette Kracke,  
GCBA Foundation

**AS A PROGRAM PARTNER OF NRPA,** the Golf Course Builders Association of America Foundation attended the recent Congress to catch up with agencies who already participate in the Sticks for Kids Program and also to spread the word about the many advantages to agency, course, and community to be had through the program.

Tara Tower, CPRP, of the Lincoln and Woodstock (New Hampshire) Recreation Department was excited to share with us how well received Sticks for Kids is in her community. The agency has four seasons of Sticks for Kids under their belt and has refined how they run the program to fit their needs. In addition to the equipment provided through the Sticks for Kids grant, Tower was also able to secure additional junior clubs with the help of a local parent who operated a golf tournament as a fundraiser.

“We run the program as eight weeks of free lessons on Wednesday evenings in July and August for 8- to 14-year-olds,” says Tower. “We assign the kids that need clubs a numbered bag that they are responsible for returning at the end of the season.”

Tower’s approach is to have participants keep the clubs for the entire summer to use at home, the driving range, and the course to practice with their parents what they are learning in lessons. If space is available on course, you may consider leaving clubs there to be available to any youth coming to play, she explains. Tower also shares the value of partnering with a local golf course.

“We partner with the Owl’s Nest in Campton, New Hampshire, and their pro teaches the lessons on course at no cost to the participants” Tower says. “About 40 youth participate in the program each year, and we have several golf parents who help with the instruction on a weekly basis.”

The Sticks for Kids Program is succeeding in introducing golf to an audience who may not otherwise have the opportunity to experience golf. But it doesn’t stop there—participants also learn important life skills like etiquette, discipline, honesty, teamwork, and environmental stewardship. These skills have made a positive impact on their success at school. The program is also creating a new interest in golf for area courses.

Charles Wheeler, managing professional at Owl’s Nest Resort and Golf Club, hosts the Sticks for Kids Program. “The Lincoln Recreation Department once again showed up in strong force and with youthful exuberance,” says Wheeler.

During the eight weeks of sessions, kids worked on swing fundamentals such as, grip, stance, and alignment then worked into the full swing with both iron and woods. The short game (chipping and putting) was also a point of focus for the kids. The clinics culminated with the kids playing on the course in a scramble format with parents walking along.

“2010 was another great year for Junior Golf at Owl’s Nest Resort and Golf,” says Wheeler. “Fun was had by all—kids, parents, and instructors!”





## Parks and Rec REACHES OUT to Schools, Coaches through GOLF

**L**incoln (Nebraska) Parks and Recreation Golf Administrator Dale Hardy has worked diligently in recent years to find ways to offer golf to community youth. The City of Lincoln is fortunate to have a 9-hole junior course available for its youth programs, including a lesson program, Sticks for Kids, Pee Wee League, Junior League, and Teen League (held at a more advanced course). The Jim Ager Memorial Junior Golf Course has hosted the Sticks for Kids program for 11 years to successfully reach youth in the city's recreation centers and youth organizations. But Hardy knew that something needed to be done to reach the kids in the classroom as well.

Lincoln Public Schools participate in First Tee's National Golf in Schools Program, which uses SNAG® equipment in an indoor setting to teach the fundamentals of grip, stance, and swing. "This is a great way to introduce the game to kids," says Hardy, "but how do we get students from the gymnasium to the course?"

For this, Hardy suggests a four-step approach. First, in early spring before your course gets too busy, host a teaching clinic for your school district's physical education and health teachers; help the teachers become better teachers of golf. Then, later in the spring, invite those teachers to bring their classes back to the course for a kids clinic and expose them to real tees, greens, clubs, rules, and etiquette situations. These mini-field trips can really ignite the golf spark. Third, every student in the program can receive a certificate for a free round of golf. In Lincoln, about 12 percent of the 7,000 students made use of the opportunity.

The fourth part of Hardy's outreach tools is somewhat unique as it involves students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's PGA Professional Golf Management (PGM) program. The city's schools are divided into quadrants and the students in each quadrant are invited to a one-day clinic led by PGM students at one of the city's courses. This is a great opportunity for children to get on a course and learn some golf basics, as well as for the PGM students to have hands-on experience organizing and carrying out such an event. Certainly, we don't all have PGM students in our community, but surely your fellow PGA professionals, adult league members, older juniors, or retirees want to get involved in continuing the golf tradition. Give them a chance and you will be surprised at their efforts...especially if it involves juniors!

—Golf Course Builder's Association of America

### ECONOMIC DRIVERS

Golf courses aren't only providing new recreational avenues for the community, but also providing economic gains as well. According to a 2005 study conducted by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, golf is a \$75 billion industry. That is more than the motion picture industry or printing industry. That means golf courses are providing a lot of cashflow and jobs for the communities they serve.

"It's more than a game," says Evans. "It makes up a lot of small businesses in America. If you look at the economic impact of the sport, that money stays local. It also provides jobs for superintendents, architects, maintenance workers, food and beverage personnel, and teenagers that need summer employment."

Ritterbusch says that he thinks the economic benefits of a golf course may be the least understood.

## The NEXT 10 Years

Here are some ways that experts say the game may change in the next 10 years.

#### **The game will explode internationally.**

As the elite business group begins to include those overseas, the game will grow in popularity as a "place to conduct business."

**Golf will take less time to play.** With many families dealing with time constraints, golf managers will need to find a way to make the game shorter.

**Drier and firmer courses will arise.** As water scarcity grows, courses will adapt.

#### **The players will be ethnically diverse.**

The sport will grow with the demographics of the nation, which means that Hispanic and Asian players will join the sport.

#### **Golf courses will need to be more business savvy.**

As budgets shrink and competition grows, course managers will have to improve in marketing, customer service, and business systems.



## Charity Case

"The remarkable economic benefit that [courses] provide is underappreciated by both the golfing and non-golfing public," he says. "They provide tax revenues to their cities, employment to citizens, and increases to property values for homes or land owners nearby."

In a recent 2009 survey conducted by South Carolina State Tourism Economist Julie Flowers, the average gross revenue of a golf course in South Carolina was approximately \$1.844 million. In addition, the study showed that golf courses produced \$276 million in federal, state, and local taxes and provided more than 33,000 jobs.

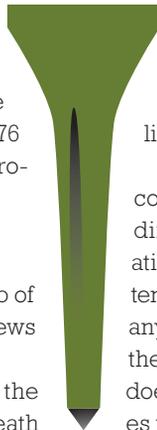
### CHALLENGES AHEAD

Though golf courses may be doing a good job of contributing to their communities, the bad news is that people aren't getting the message.

"I tell people that golf courses are like the human body—you see the skin but underneath there are arteries and organs that make it function and are doing the important work," Ritterbusch says.

"Golf is a legitimate and important industry and

**Golf is not only providing revenue for the community, but also contributes to society's causes. According to a 2005 study by the Professional Golf Association, the golfing industry raised \$3.5 billion for charity causes that year. Of that, only \$130 million was raised by professional tours—the rest of it was raised on local courses.**



they are excluding golf courses from key funding legislation. According to Mona, golf has been specifically excluded from three aid packages: the Katrina bill, the disaster relief bill, and stimulus funding.

Educating city councils and lawmakers that control the budgets of municipal courses is no different. Evans suggests that park and recreation managers and municipal course superintendents make the case that a golf course is like any other recreational facility. "You have to make them look at golf like the pool," he says. "What does the pool do? It brings kids together, it teaches them about how to be good sports, and it provides a way for families to get healthy. Take that list and lay it on top of golf—it does the same thing and provides a sport that juniors, seniors, men, women, and anyone who wants to is welcome to play." 🌟

it helps to sustain our way of life—it provides open space, provides jobs and revenue," Mona says. "The problem is that we need to do a better job of communicating that in the future."

Mona says that his organization is working to educate lawmakers on Capitol Hill—not because they golf a lot—but because

## The NRPA Golf Coalition

**I**N AN EFFORT TO PROMOTE golf and its many benefits to the public and park and recreation communities, NRPA facilitated development of the Golf Coalition in December 2009. The coalition consists of golf industry leaders who work in collaboration to ensure that best practices, research, educational programming, health and conservation benefits, advocacy, and cross-communications objectives are shared across all stakeholders. The goal of the coalition is to work collaboratively to strengthen the value of golf and its effective economic, health, and conservation impact upon communities.

With assistance from the coalition, NRPA created the new Golf Knowledge Center ([www.nrpa.org/golf](http://www.nrpa.org/golf)) which includes a comprehensive list of case studies, research, and information for agencies wishing to advance their golf programs and facilities. Resources include data about health, economic impact, conservation, human impact, golf course maintenance, and operations. In addition, there are links for careers in the golf industry. This new resource will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis to ensure that NRPA members have access to the latest tools and information available from our partners.

### Who's who in the NRPA Golf Coalition:

- American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA; [www.asgca.org](http://www.asgca.org))
- Audubon International (AI; [www.auduboninternational.org](http://www.auduboninternational.org))
- Golf Course Builders Association of America (GCBA; [www.gcbaa.org](http://www.gcbaa.org))
- Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA; [www.gcsaa.org](http://www.gcsaa.org))
- National Alliance for Accessible Golf (NAAG; [www.accessgolf.org](http://www.accessgolf.org))
- National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA; [www.ngcoa.org](http://www.ngcoa.org))
- National Golf Foundation (NGF; [www.ngf.org](http://www.ngf.org))
- National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA; [www.nrpa.org](http://www.nrpa.org))
- The PGA of America (PGA; [www.playgolfamerica.com](http://www.playgolfamerica.com))
- World Golf Foundation (WGF; [www.worldgolffoundation.org](http://www.worldgolffoundation.org))

If you are interested in learning more about NRPA's Golf Coalition, please contact Nancy Logan at [nlogan@nrpa.org](mailto:nlogan@nrpa.org).