



Turning a practice facility into a genuine profit centre

BY LESTER GEORGE | 16 JULY 2015



A section of George's design at The First Tee Chesterfield, which includes a 'tot course'

There are few activities more necessary than practice to attain proficiency in any game. In golf, practice is the single most essential piece of the puzzle for players who wish to learn or improve any aspect of their game. Although a handful of accomplished players are self-taught, even the leading professional players rely on instructors and a practice regimen to keep them at their best. Practice is the method by which we learn the complexities of golf, and it is how we hone our skills as we mature as players.

For those who play frequently, practice comes mostly by way of achieving shots on the golf course. Most players, however, do not have the luxury of daily – or even weekly – play. For every golfer who has days or weeks passing between rounds, pre-round practice for swing maintenance is a must. If only for this reason, adjacent practice facilities are essential for both public and private golf courses. But there are many more reasons that make them imperative, not the least of which is that a well-designed practice facility can add revenue to the bottom line.

Sometimes a quick trip to the club to sharpen some skills is all a player wants or needs, but facilities designed for interactive practice will keep them learning. Interactive practice allows for immediate situational feedback, and it is this feedback that keeps golfers engaged and inspired to learn. This equates to more frequent practice, and play, which equates to greater revenue.

Interactive practice should create or simulate any situation that might occur on the golf course, as teachers guide their students through these shots in sequence or at random. Jonathan Ireland, my golf coach at Kinloch Golf Club, uses this approach to help me to improve the fundamentals of my game. Instead of instruction followed by repetitive ball-beating, he leads me to apply the focus of the lesson by changing the environment or instrument like the club, target, lie, or turf condition.



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For example, if we are working on alignment, Jonathan will make me change targets (and sometimes clubs) with each shot, which engages me to not only apply the lesson but react to the situation. This teaching method provides tremendous feedback and reduces monotony, which makes the entire session more rewarding. It is this reward that keeps players wanting more, which increases the time and money they will spend on practice and play.

The practice facility I designed at Kinloch Golf Club allows a player to train for any shot required on any course. More importantly, the player can work on every aspect of their game within a 150 yard radius of the first tee. Players want to learn to master all of the situations they will potentially encounter on the golf course. They want a realistic experience with contours, turf conditions, and similar terrain. They want shots that emulate fairways, rough, bunkers, and recovery from trees. They want to be able to practice and learn in the greatest variety possible, short game, putting, chipping, and everything in between.

Practice areas designed for sustainable maintenance or decreased use of turf benefit the environment as well as the budget. If you are short on space, creative ideas such as a reversible short course, convertible areas for multi-purpose uses and programs conducted inside the confines of the range are gaining popularity. Golf simulators, covered and indoor hitting bays are a way to keep clients onsite during inclement weather and colder months. More clients on site imply more revenue.

The most fundamental advice I can offer for planning to improve a practice facility is use a professional to guide you through the planning, design and construction process. Last year, I was a speaker at several Golf Range Association of America boot camps – a mix of teaching professionals, owners, general managers, superintendents, and golf professionals – where I offered solutions to the common (and some uncommon) logistical and financial challenges clubs face when attempting to offer more practice options.

To start the planning process, I recommend envisioning the facility you want as if you have no boundaries or constraints. Imagine your ideal practice facility with every desired feature. Once those goals are determined, allow your designer to incorporate as many of those things as possible into the final design. Things like budget, space, safety, and feasibility of construction will of course be determining factors in the design, and a design professional can show you the best ways to marry your desires with the realities of the site.

The most important budget consideration is that it be realistic. Your designer can lead you to lower-cost construction alternatives that don't sacrifice quality, and the final practice facility design will largely depend on what can be accommodated financially.

Operational and programming realities also need to be realistically assessed. Your teaching professional must be consulted from the beginning. After all, they know the clientele and should have their finger on the pulse of the needs. It takes dedication to create these programs and willingness to tailor them to fit the students.

Convenience also drives revenue for public and private facilities alike. Different concepts such as larger cups, FootGolf (playing with a soccer ball into a 22 inch hole) and SNAG are also gaining popularity because the whole family can participate, and it takes less time.

Market trends are showing that people are devoting less time to playing golf and more time practicing golf. Even the most dedicated daily players don't always have time to play a full round, but half an hour at an excellent practice facility will give them their fix. An hour or two a few times a week is a much more reasonable schedule demand than a four or five-hour round. It is also more reasonable financially. The economy has affected rounds played much more than time spent at the range.

Practice facilities are becoming one of the main attributes that keep a course competitive in the market place. High-quality facilities designed to offer options for creative shot-making, visualisation of all conditions on the course, and immediate variable feedback can parlay practice from a necessary evil into a desirable experience. Engaged players will allocate more time and resources to learning, leading to more time spent at the club or course, which increases the club's bottom line.

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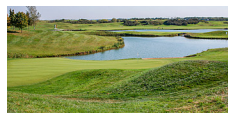
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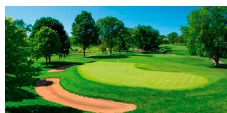
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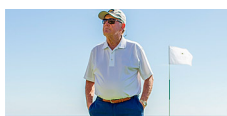
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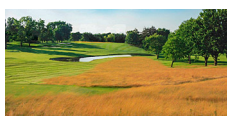
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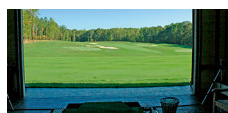


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