

Golf's bunny slopes

Learning facilities | Adam Lawrence

Making it easier for new golfers to learn the game is central to growing participation, whether in mature markets like the US or in developing countries. Adam Lawrence

looks at how golf operators are learning from other sports in providing facilities that make learning simpler and more fun—and how golf architects are involved from the start



People play golf for a variety of reasons; challenge, competition, exercise, some even as a living. But at heart golf is a leisure activity, a recreation; and thus, its appeal can be summed up in one word. FUN!

If golf is not fun, why would you play? Every golfer has pondered on this thought at some point, usually after a particular round, perhaps in terrible weather or after five hours stuck behind the glacial foursome from hell. Some do, indeed, give up the game—legendary writer Henry Longhurst, a scratch player for thirty years and a former captain of Cambridge University's golf team, recounts in his autobiography how, afflicted by putting woes and



Golf is hard, and requires a reasonable amount of skill before it is much fun

prevented by work commitments from getting the fortnight's serious practice he knew he needed, finally put his clubs in the loft, locked the door and descended the ladder feeling as though a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. But most of us, once bitten by the golf bug, continue to muddle through, accepting the bad days as the norm and reveling in the occasional triumph.

The difficulty of golf is central to making it a lifelong obsession, one that we cannot kick, despite knowing we will never master it. But—and this is crucial—it requires a certain amount of skill in order to start being fun. There is precious little pleasure to be had in standing hour after

hour on a cold, windswept driving range, built in a dingy corner of a business park, trying and failing to get golf balls airborne, while a bored assistant pro resets your grip for the twentieth time. Nor—to go to the opposite extreme—is it enjoyable to go out on a 7,500 yard championship course, laden with deep bunkers, water hazards and greens stimping at eleven feet, if you can barely make contact with the golf ball.

Some golfers dismiss the plight of the beginner. But one thing is for sure: without finding a way to make learning the game simpler, cheaper and more fun, golf is destined not to grow as quickly as everyone in the industry would like. Few people in

China, India or Brazil have a father who plays golf and can introduce them to the game.

The success of the ski industry in North America in the past ten years has grabbed the attention of many in other leisure businesses. Snow sports share much in common with golf (in some places, they even share facilities, with resorts offering golf in the summer and skiing in the winter). They are relatively expensive and aspirational and suffer from a perception among some potential participants that they are 'not for the likes of me'. And—most crucially of all—they demand a fair amount of learning before participants can really start to understand the pleasure they can offer.

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Lester George, ASGCA

But the ski industry has one advantage over golf: it has been able to make learning fun. No one learns to ski on a steep, icy double black diamond run. Instead, resorts provide straightforward hills—Americans call them ‘bunny slopes’ though the term isn’t in common use elsewhere in the world—and organize ski school programs which typically see rank beginners ready to tackle proper runs out on the main mountains within a short time.

Learning programs

Golf is not lacking in learning programs. From programs created by individual clubs and course operators up to the large scale initiatives from the game’s governing bodies, such as ‘Get Golf Ready,’ there are plenty of opportunities for beginners to get coaching in the basics. Excellent though many of these programs are,

they all face one central obstacle, which is the huge jump from hitting balls on a practice range to going out on a full-sized golf course. Making this leap is intimidating: beginners worry they will look foolish and that ‘real golfers’ will be irritated when they get in the way. Too many of those who enroll for the training programs never actually progress to the golf course itself. That’s why it’s occurring to more and more people in the industry that golf needs its very own bunny slopes.

ASGCA members led the way on this discussion when Michael Berry of the National Ski Areas Association spoke at the 2011 ASGCA Annual Meeting (Fall 2011 *By Design*). The variety of golf facilities that could come under the generic heading of bunny slopes is remarkable. What should be common to all, though, is that they need to provide a learning environment that gives beginners a taste of golf’s true appeal: not just a flat field with a tin shack protecting a few teeing mats.

For golf operators, the best thing about bunny slopes is that they offer two distinct benefits. Obviously, creating more golfers who can use your main course once they’ve acquired a bit of skill and confidence is a great business development strategy, but, done properly, the bunny slope can be a profit center in its own right, in many cases making use of small plots of land that were previously not serving much purpose.

Such facilities can make sense for all types of golf course, whether resort, private or daily fee. But, fairly obviously, public courses, especially those that are seeking to make a profit, have most to gain from increased participation. So it might be surprising to find one of the most interesting projects of this kind at a course conceived as an elite private club.

Bill Coore, ASGCA and his partner Ben Crenshaw’s design at the recently-opened Dormie Club in the North Carolina sandhills has been widely acclaimed. Envisaged as a private club including a real estate development, Dormie’s owners ran smack into the economic downturn, and were forced, at least for the time being, to change their business model and open the course for public play. Now, they have engaged Virginia-based architect Lester George, ASGCA to create a unique ten hole short course and practice facility on a 70 acre parcel of land near the main course.

“We had this long, skinny piece of property that backs up to some wetlands,” explains George. “When the club’s property is fully developed, it will need a storage facility for some waste water, and this piece of land was identified for that purpose. But it faces onto housing parcels, so the owners wanted it to have more than just the storage capacity. So we came up with the idea of a short course.”

The long, narrow nature of the parcel of land meant that routing golf holes was inevitably a challenge. George and his associate Glenn Muckley worked separately on routing ideas, and, when they compared notes, found they had produced similar loops of holes, with one key difference—one plan went clockwise, and the other counterclockwise.

Putting the two plans together produced the unique idea: why not create a loop that could be played in either direction? This isn’t just a marketing gimmick, George says: rather, the reversible nature of the routing means that any number of potential loops are available, giving players a wide range of options. “We have a two hole, a five hole and a seven hole loop,” he says. “To play

FAUQUIER SPRINGS: HELPING RETAIN MEMBERS

Fauquier Springs Country Club in Warrenton, Va., canvassed its membership on what sort of additional recreational facilities they would like, and the number one choice was a larger short game area. Architect Tom Clark, ASGCA, used a parcel of land adjacent to one of the course’s existing holes to create a three green triangle that can not only test players’ skills in putting, chipping, pitching and sand play, but also could prove to be a learning center for beginners and established players alike. “It’s not just that the club wants to provide an additional amenity for the existing membership,” says Clark. “In fact, the research showed that several members had left the club because of a lack of such a facility.”

all ten holes in either direction will take about ninety minutes, and it'll be incredibly cool, with tons of variety. I've worked very hard on making it equally playable in both directions."

For Dormie, whose long-term business model is still in flux, the flexibility this offers is a real boon. "Could be a standalone executive course that could be sold to the public on an as needed basis, maybe with one or two national teachers attached," says George. "I think there's a need for these kind of courses, yes to grow the game, but also to give regular golfers an alternative. Think about how many golfers visit the Pinehurst area. I don't think I could ever get tired of playing these holes—it's a perfect use of 90 minutes at the end of the day. And as a bonus, it solves the stormwater and sewage treatment problems of the site."

Elsewhere in North Carolina, Charlotte public course operator Ratcliffe Golf Services has also realized the potential of the bunny slope concept. Ratcliffe runs five courses in the Charlotte area, and, in the past 15 years, has built 'learning courses' at each of its properties. These range from three hole loops essentially designed for honing short game skills to larger nine hole courses that give learners the chance to practice shots up to 250 yards in length—perfect preparation for graduating to the big courses.

Ratcliffe's experience shows that learners prefer this kind of facility to simply beating balls on the range. Not only does the bunny slope give those who use it a chance to improve their skills, but it gives them a genuine feel of a 'real' golf course, complete with the away-from-it-all experience that golf can provide. It makes it both easier and more fun for newcomers to learn the game, and it helps the operator make money. What could be better? ●

LINKS AT TERRANEA: ENCOURAGING KIDS



Architect Todd Eckenrode, ASGCA Associate, built the nine hole Links at Terranea on a dramatic oceanfront property in Southern California. Terranea's dramatic mix of holes has seen it named the second best par three course in the US by *Golf* magazine; but now the course has added a set of kids/beginners tees to make it

playable by an even wider mix of golfers. "These tees are obviously shorter than any of the others, but they are also swung over significantly to get an open view into the greens, so there are no forced carries. And the fairway cut is rolled into the tee so that even if they top it, the ball will roll forward, sometimes all the way onto the green," says Eckenrode.

PALM HILLS: GROWING GOLF IN EGYPT



If bunny slopes are needed in established golf markets like the US, they are even more important in countries where the game is new and local golfers are scarce. This is especially true given the reality that most courses in emerging golf markets are either aimed at tourists or are part of real estate developments, and are thus likely to be too difficult and expensive for would-be local players, at least in the early days.

At Palm Hills in Egypt, architect John Sanford, ASGCA, built a practice range that doubles as a nine-hole short course. "Typically, the facility is used as a standard practice range with nine target greens but there are scheduled times when the range is used as a short course to teach new players in an on-course setting without taking them on the championship course. The holes range from 80 to 170 yards," says Sanford.