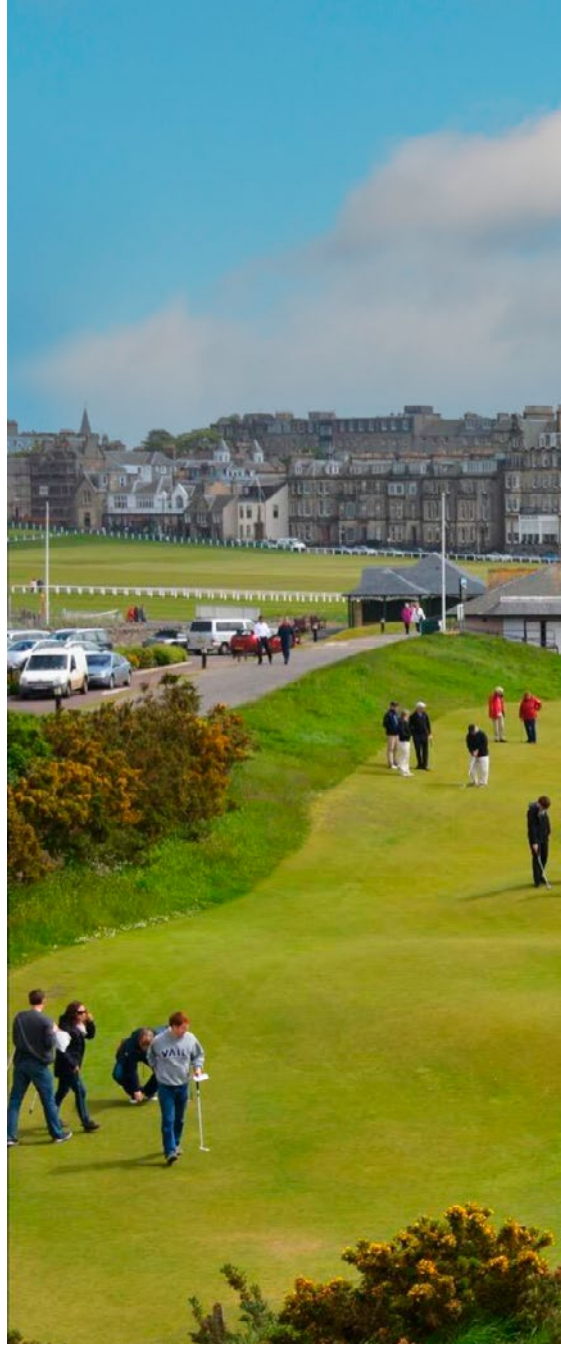
The flat stick formula



Are putting courses a good investment, and what gives them the best chance for success? Richard Humphreys speaks with ASGCA architects to find out more.

It's St Andrews, Scotland, in the mid-19th century, and the caddies are disgruntled.

They had laid out a small putting green on land close to where the Rusacks hotel now stands, a place for them to pass time while waiting for a bag. But several young ladies – daughters of Royal & Ancient members – had decided to play there too.

To appease all, Old Tom Morris was asked to lay out a nine-hole course for these new golfers, on a patch of land away from the caddies. They were limited – by their dresses and what was considered a dignified range of movement – to short swings, so each hole was designed to be played with just a cleek and putter.

St Andrews Ladies' Golf Club was born and – a little later, once the course had been extended onto undulating land nearby – so too was the Himalayas, the famous putting course at the home of golf and inspiration for countless more around the world today.

The Himalayas became a social hotspot, with over 400 lady members and 200 'gentlemen associates' by the start of the 20th century, plus countless children enjoying their first steps into the sport.

Today, anyone can book online and pay £4 (about $5, or half that for children and seniors) for a round. On a summer's day it is typically swarming with people of every generation, and a great way for anyone to experience golf in the town, in a wonderful location right between West Sands beach and the first green of the Old course.

Unlike a practice putting green, putting courses have distinct holes – 18 of them, in the case of the Himalayas – that are usually played in a set order. These miniature golf courses have become particularly popular at



Photo: Courtesy of The R&A

'The Himalayas' at St Andrews has inspired countless putting courses around the world

resorts – Pinehurst, Streamsong and Erin Hills all have one – as a fun, accessible and social way to while away a spare hour or two.

But can a putting course work for any club, and what should be considered before making such an investment?

A plot for success

"Location is absolutely critical," says Kevin Atkinson, ASGCA, who has designed putting courses at two country clubs in his home state of Colorado: Red Rocks and Boulder. "If you aren't tripping over it, don't bother," he says. "It needs to be in a place where friends can have a sandwich or a beer and just goof around."

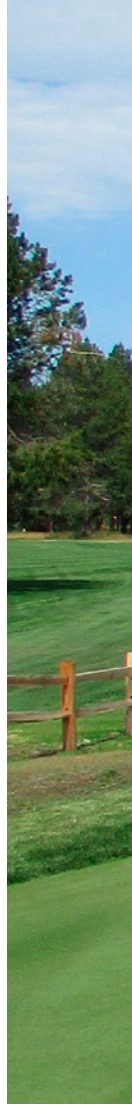
Pinehurst recognized this too. In advance of the 2014 U.S. Open, it had built its Thistle Dhu putting course 150 yards away from the clubhouse. A few years later, when Gil Hanse, ASGCA, was hired by the resort to redesign the No. 4 course, his brief also included rebuilding Thistle Dhu in a new location right under the clubhouse veranda.

John Fought, ASGCA, says: "A putting course needs to be managed just like any area of a golf course. It should be built near the clubhouse so employees in the golf shop can manage it properly."

In 2020, Fought created a 12-hole putting course, Little Meadow, for Black Butte Ranch in Oregon. Designed as a distinctive out-and-back loop that can be set up to play in either direction – on a plot



Photo: Red Rocks Country Club



Kevin Atkinson, ASGCA, adopted a "wilder the better" approach for his putting course at Red Rocks in Colorado

of land between the range and eighteenth hole. It's in full view from the entrance road, just a stone's throw from both the golf shop and maintenance facility and, crucially, right beside the resort's pub.

So, with the location set, what about the design?

Walk on the wild side?

"My mentality is almost the wilder the better, because this is for entertainment," says Atkinson. "We're not creating these putting courses for practice, it is about laughing and having fun.

"At Red Rocks, the area closest to the pro shop is flatter where players can practice more traditional putts. But the further you get away, the wilder it gets. There are little islands, railroad ties, you can ricochet shots and then it kind of hooks around like a boomerang to tie into the second green."

There is a limit, points out Atkinson. "We can't make them too mad! There are examples where the contours are too extreme, making them very difficult to maintain. I've been to places where the maintenance staff have a different mower for the putting course, which hits the return on investment."

"We're not creating these putting courses for practice, it is about laughing and having fun"

Atkinson also references a conversation with Sean McCue, who was previously superintendent at The Country Club at Castle Pines in Colorado and laid out The Crags, the club's cliff-edge putting course. "He said that the crazier the course was set up, the more usage it got."

Raymond Hearn, ASGCA, echoes that warning, highlighting cost and difficulty as potential stumbling blocks. "One major mistake to



Photo: John Fought Design

The Little Meadow putting course at Black Butte Ranch has been designed as a reversible 12-hole loop

avoid is having the contours so extreme that the putting experience becomes too difficult and reduces the enjoyment factor," he says. "Creativity and visual interest are all still key to success but you can cross the line with the challenge.

"I always like my putting course designs to be visually appealing, fun and interesting to play, reasonable to maintain and have an infinite number of ways to be played."

Fought adds: "I like movement that allows for breaks and rolls that inspire a player to think out of the box. You should not make holes too long, however, otherwise players may take divots when trying to whack their putter! You also need to have flexibility – you can achieve this by moving the cup around or playing backwards. I do not think we need to have bunkers on these courses, but rather focus on interesting contours."

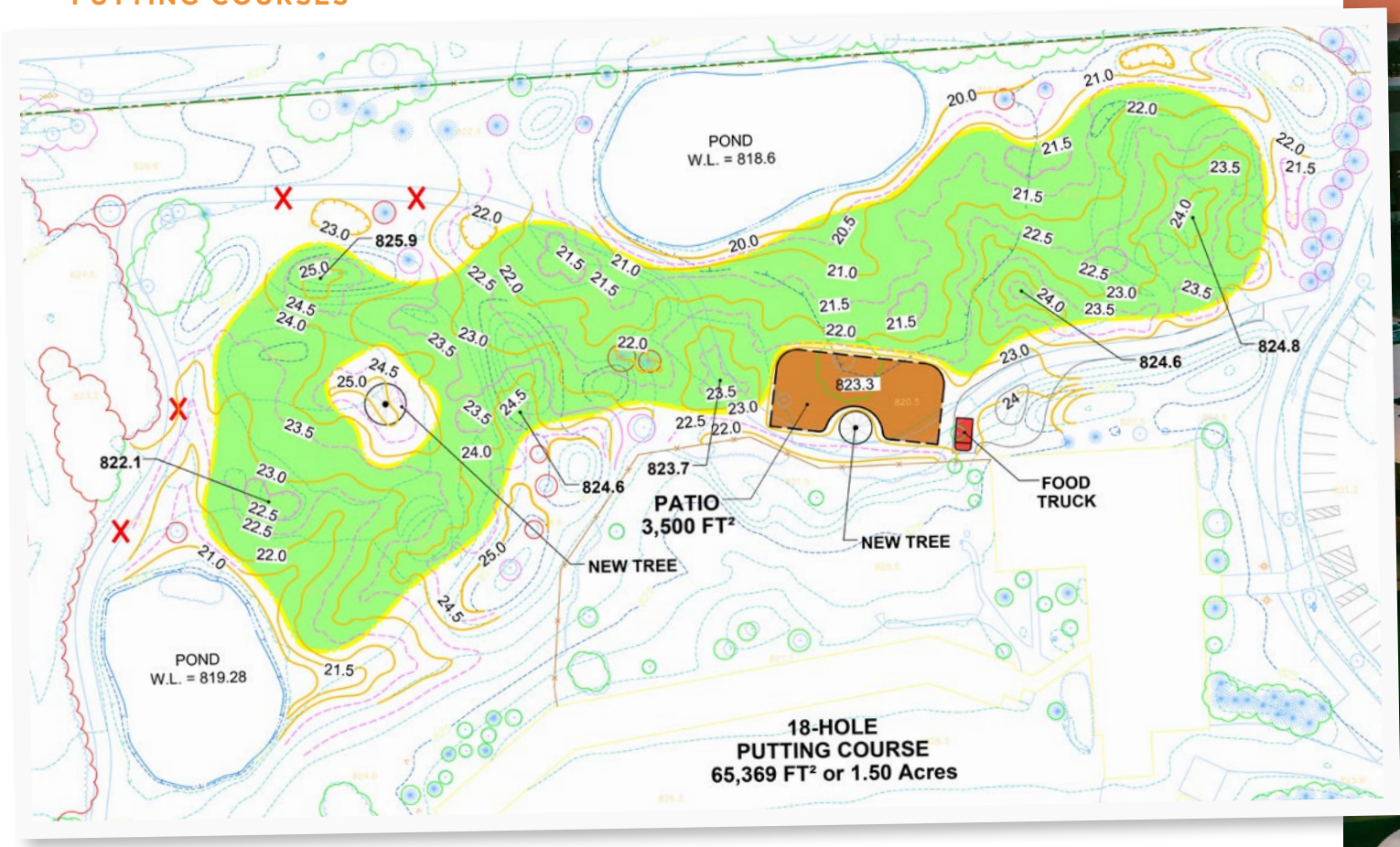
Putting for dough

Hearn says that a return on investment (ROI) feasibility assessment is essential for clubs before proceeding with a putting course. He has two putting courses opening at resorts this year: Boyne Highlands Resort and the Saint John's Resort, both in Michigan, and designs in progress at two private clubs: Sugarloaf Golf Club in Carrabassett Valley, Maine, and White Lake Golf Club in Whitehall, Michigan.

"An ROI feasibility study varies from club to club in terms of detail, but it usually involves studying soft costs, construction costs and maintenance costs versus forecasted income over a five-, ten-, 15- and 20-year basis," says Hearn. "The general managers, superintendents and course managers I have spoken to agree that a putting course can have a positive and synergistic impact on the entire golf operation.

"Construction and maintenance costs need to be carefully considered and discussed with the client early in the design process. The four facilities I am working with wanted another profitable amenity they could offer to their patrons, with putting courses being able to grow the game and act as another revenue source for clubs."

Image: Raymond Hearn, ASGCA



The Little Cardinal putting course designed by Raymond Hearn, ASGCA, for Saint John's Resort will open in 2024, and be located alongside a patio with space for food trucks

Revenue can come in several forms: a fee to play, higher membership dues (or attracting more members), merchandise and, perhaps most significantly, increased spending on food and drink.

"For resorts, the presence of a captive audience means it makes more sense as you're giving guests something else to do," says Atkinson. "They might end up spending more money on food and drink or in the pro shop.

"Putting courses work best at private clubs as an added amenity. It can attract more players, give existing members more things to do, driving club usage and bring in money through food and beverage.

"At Red Rocks we had a championship for the local pros. We set up food trucks and drinks stations all around the putting course and so, when they were finished playing golf, as a fun thing to do, we held a putting competition. Those guys were laughing and having a ton of fun and that's what it is all about."

For Boulder, Atkinson transformed the practice green to also incorporate a putting course and teeing area for the tenth hole. This multi-functional space now hosts putting leagues and competitions.

"The direct ROI from the Boulder and Red Rocks putting courses is the food and beverage," says Atkinson. "That's why at both clubs we are in the process of incorporating lights and fire pits so we can keep people on site longer and they can enjoy the club's hospitality into the evening, bringing more money into the club.

"A big part of having a putting course is that it also becomes a source of pride for the club. It is something to show off, it helps to sell memberships and drives usage."

Little Meadow has not only become a source of pride at Black Butte Ranch, but it has also been a financial success according to Jeff Fought, director of golf at the club. The putting course cost $350,000 and in 2024 – less than five years after opening – the resort will have paid off its construction cost.



Photo: PopStroke

PopStroke has 11 venues and more planned. Its growth is testament to the appeal of putting

"We average about 8,200 rounds or $82,000 each year," he says. "The average cost per month in expenses is $1,700 through mowing, rolling, cup changing and repairs." With a six-month season, that's an annual cost of just $10,200.

A social hub

"Golf is at an interesting point," says Atkinson. "Golf clubs are starting to realize that it's not just about their 18 holes, but there's an entertainment factor that needs to be considered and can be financially rewarding. Topgolf has influenced these clubs to start thinking about how they are offering entertainment. It's an evolving industry that has been fun to watch as people start doing more creative things."

The emergence of entertainment venue chains like Puttery, Puttshack and PopStroke, which are all focused on putting, emphasizes the power of golf to drive social interaction. "Not long ago, if I used the word 'fun' to describe a proposed design, it wouldn't have been that well respected," says Atkinson. "That always confused me. What's wrong with fun? We should all be having fun.

"I think the future of putting courses and other golf entertainment amenities is going to be interesting. There will be successes and failures and I think we'll look back at this time and learn from it. We're in the middle of this wave and it is exciting for golf." ●

> "Golf clubs are starting to realize that it's not just about their 18 holes"

For advice on the feasibility of a putting course at your club, contact an ASGCA member. You can find a full list – organized by location – at www.asgca.org/architects.