

The power of tournaments

Golf courses are relying on tournaments to drive revenue and improve perception

BY LAIRA MARTIN

Tournaments can simply be a way to engage golfers in friendly competition. But for public courses, tournaments have a big effect on rounds, revenue and visibility. In fact, experts say an estimated 23 percent of public-course revenue comes from tournaments and leagues, with some facilities recording as much as 35 percent.

Heron Glen Golf Course in Ringoes, N.J., added \$17,000 to its bottom line by introducing night golf outings.

"We started looking into ways to drive play at non-peak times," General Manager Tim Ward said of the easily replicable tournament, which works best in a four-person scramble format. "This is the best revenue you can make when it is dark out."

Because of an extended rainy season, Heron Glen Golf Course hosted only three events last year, with an average of 60 players per event and a total of 176 rounds. Still, the three events generated about \$17,000 in revenue. For \$80 a pop, entry fees also cover green fees, cart rentals, range balls, two glow balls and food and beverage.

"The battery-charged golf ball has a 90 compression rating. It almost feels real. It flies and spins like a real golf ball," Ward said. "It stays lit for 10 minutes. If it dims out, you're behind pace of play."

Night golf is both inexpensive and easy to set up, Ward said. Night Flyer's 60-player tournament package only costs \$545, and at Heron Glen, it only takes two people 90 minutes to set up the course. The only extra equipment a golfer needs is a



Sweetgrass Golf Club in Harris, Mich., increased visibility by hosting the LPGA Symetra Tour Island Resort Championship.

flashlight.

"One of the best things is it's a very small investment," Ward said. "Expenses ended up being only about 8 percent of the total revenue."

This year, Ward is shooting for five night golf tournaments, adding \$13,000 in revenue. Heron Glen Golf Course has also started to host night golf tournaments for visiting groups, including one for 72 people from the athletics department at Rutgers University - Camden.

As expected, night golf has mostly attracted millennial-aged golfers.

"It's definitely a unique event," Ward said. "It's not for everybody. It's an opportunity for those that want a different and

entertaining golf experience."

And if nothing else, night golf makes for a good lesson in pace of play.

Dave Douglas, director of golf at Sweetgrass Golf Club, a public resort course in Harris, Mich., wasn't as concerned with revenue as he was with female play and visibility.

Before the LPGA Symetra Tour Island Resort Championship came to Sweetgrass, only 15 percent of play came from female golfers, which Douglas thinks may be, in part, due to the attached casino. Now, women play about 25 to 30 percent of total rounds.

"Since then, we have [more than] doubled the amount of women golfers we

have,” he said. “A big part of it has to do with the exposure of the Tour coming here.”

The LPGA Symetra Tour Island Resort Championship also created increased visibility for the course and the entire Midwest. When it was first held at Sweetgrass



Sweetgrass Golf Club asked nonprofit organizations and local schools to sell tickets and allowed them to keep all of the proceeds.

Golf Club in 2008, it was the only professional golf event in Michigan that year. This year, the Tour is making several steps in the region.

“The whole colony only has about 35,000 people,” Douglas said. “It’s a rarity for the area to have something like this.”

So he knew he had to make it stick. Sweetgrass Golf Club asked local schools, sports teams and nonprofit organizations to help sell tickets, and it let the organizations keep the money. And rather than giving the already-sponsored tournament players gift bags with balls and gear, each player receives 100 two-dollar bills.

“Travel expenses are their biggest concern,” he said. “We decided on two-dollar bills so the community can actually see that the girls are putting money back into the community.”

Palouse Ridge Golf Club General

Manager Todd Lupkes also understands the tests that come with operating a golf course in a small town. But Pullman, Wash., also happens to be a college town.

“If you look at the signs in town, it says the population is 32,000 people, but 22,000 are students,” Lupkes said. “It’s such a small community to begin with. People’s perception about how much fun they had at the golf course or the food they had — all those little things — gets around the community really quickly.”

In the city of Pullman, Palouse Ridge Golf Club stands alone. Before Washington State University built the 18-hole championship golf course in 2008, the city of Pullman had one 9-hole course that was unprepared to host events.

“If WSU alumni wanted to do something, they had to go somewhere else like Spokane or Seattle,” Lupkes said. “Now that money comes to Pullman.”

The course is hosting a lot of tournaments, so much so that Lupkes simply can’t accommodate all events.

The university-owned course was built to host high-end prestigious events. That goal can be checked off the list as Palouse Ridge Golf Club hosted the Men’s Golf Pac-12 Championship in April.

“It’s essentially set up like a mini U.S. Open,” Lupkes said. “The course is playing firm, fast and with really thick, long rough. The regulars are eating it up.”

Of the 60 golfers playing on 12, five-person teams, at least 15 are top 100 amateur players worldwide, Lupkes said. This along with other tournaments such as the John Harbottle III Pro AM, a U.S. Amateur Qualifier, and the CourseCo Championship, have helped attract a spectrum of golfers, rather than just students.

“Bringing those events to Pullman brings a lot of prestige and pride,” Lupkes said. “Of our 20,000 to 22,000 annual rounds, student play is only about 7 or 8 percent.”

Its management company, CourseCo,

has made hosting larger events feasible.

“If I were to call Nike and say ‘I need 120 backpacks donated for a tournament,’ they’d say ‘Who are you?’” he said. “But when CourseCo calls, they say, ‘Sure.’ That’s the difference.”

Randolph Golf Complex hopes a tournament will save it. The Tucson golf facility is facing community efforts to expand nearby Reid Park by converting part of the golf course into shared-use space.

Locals’ visions of creating Tucson’s “Central Park,” at the expense of the golf course, have pushed General Manager Robb Palmgren to do everything he can to showcase the course’s positive contributions to the city.

“What we have to do first is change people’s perception of the course,” Palmgren said. “We want it to be a positive reflection [of the city of Tucson].”

Step one was fixing up the courses, an effort that started when the city stepped down as operator and hired OB Sports to run its five golf facilities in February 2014.

“OB Sports came in and started cleaning up the courses, adding brand new golf carts, repainting the buildings and providing better customer service,” Palmgren said.

Step two was ramping up Tucson City Golf’s 2015 men’s amateur tour, held over two weekends in April and May.

“The Tucson City amateur tournament [provided the perfect stage] to prove to the Tucson community that the courses are back and better than ever,” Palmgren said.

The tournament attracted 120 entries this year, the most ever.

“In the past, the entry fee didn’t really give players anything besides getting to play,” Palmgren said. “Now they get food each day, a gift card for signing up and a luncheon at Randolph. We changed it to offer more with each entry and [with all of the improvements], we can charge a bit more as it’s a much better value.”

Is it enough to save Randolph Golf Complex? Only time and local politics will tell.