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## FROM THE CEO VANTAGE POINT

By Jay Karen, CEO, NGCOA | [jay@ngcoa.org](mailto:jay@ngcoa.org)

# Thanksgiving in Golf

**T**hanksgiving is my favorite of all the holidays we tend to celebrate. Why? Because of its humility and simplicity. And because it doesn't involve decorating the exterior of my house. Seriously though, when we turn our attention to gratitude, even for a day (or just a moment if you are reading this), something changes in our minds, our energy and even our behaviors. Practicing gratitude requires a pause, and in that pause you are taking stock of what you are receiving or have received.

People tend to be grateful for the abundance they may be receiving, in whatever form or whatever size it might be. And yet we can even be grateful for scarcity, and the lessons it can teach. There is a wonderful video on social media of Stephen Colbert expressing gratitude for the suffering he has had in his life. Find it and watch it.

Connecting the dots to golf and the golf industry, I want to use my pulpit and column inches as 2023 ends to lift up someone in this industry who is the embodiment of gratitude. If you don't know Kevin Carpenter, your task is now to find him on LinkedIn and get connected. Kevin's alter ego is the "Gratitude," and if you've had the good fortune of spending time with KC, you know very well how on-brand that is. The man left behind a successful career in the technology and golf car space to take a risk on gratitude. In a world where more and more scarcity, poverty (of all kinds), strife, conflict and nastiness is being experienced or peddled, Kevin is the chief hedge fund manager of something that is strangely counterculture. Gratitude.

What Kevin knows and preaches, we already know: there is something inherently special about the game of golf and what it does for the people who play it and the people who work to serve it up to the people who play it. It's a vessel for more charitable giving

than any other activity. In a world where you do your best to avoid even the person sitting next to you on an airplane, golf will make strangers fast, and even life-long, friends in minutes. In a concrete world, it brings us the relief of nature. The list of attributes, features and benefits could go on and on. What I love about Kevin and the Gratitude's mission is that it is about getting to essence of the game, which is not the game itself, but what the game can do. It's reminiscent a bit of the mission of The First Tee, which is not about growing the game (per se), but about growing people through the game.

The Gratitude is experimenting with programming and messaging and growing a humble business around it. In an industry that likes to play it safe and try to just hit it down the middle, Kevin is taking us on a circuitous journey to make sure we stop and smell the roses, open our eyes to the possibilities of solar energy, connect yoga with golf, recognize the importance of mental health, and so much more. Gratitude is what we can feel after a satisfying walk with a bag of sticks slung over our shoulders. When we pause and think about how much truly went into allowing us to have that experience.

The owner who took a risk on the business. The architect for the mastery of beauty. The superintendent for demonstrating care and custodianship. The golf professional for helping to run the business and curate the hospitality.

Kevin recognizes that gratitude is much more than a feeling; it is something worth harnessing and using as a new source of fuel to spread increasing goodness among people. I'm here for it and encourage you to open your minds, pause and be there for it too.

Happy Holidays to the NGCOA family (members, sponsors and our amazing staff) and to the rest of the industry. 



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# NGCOA Files Comments on DOL Overtime Rule

**O**n November 5, 2023, the National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA) **submitted comments** regarding the United States Department of Labor's proposed rule – *Defining and Delimiting the Exemptions for Executive, Administrative, Professional, Outside Sales, and Computer Employees*.

The Department of Labor (Department) announced a **Notice of Proposed Rule-making (NPRM)** on August 30, 2023, aiming to revise regulations under the Fair Labor Standards Act, particularly the exemptions for executive, administrative, and professional employees. The proposed changes also raise the standard salary level of highly compensated employees' total annual compensation threshold. Additionally, an automatic updating mechanism is suggested to adjust these thresholds based on current earnings data.

The Fair Labor Standards Act ensures minimum wage and overtime pay for most workers but allows for various exemptions. To qualify for the executive, administrative, and professional (EAP) exemption, employees must be salaried, meet a minimum salary level determined by the DOL, and perform specific duties. The proposed rule intends to elevate the minimum salary threshold for the EAP exemption from \$35,568 to \$55,068 annually, with a potential final rule increase to \$60,209. For highly compensated employees, the minimum will increase to \$147,414.

The National Golf Course Owners Association acknowledges the significance of establishing fair and market-driven wages. However, they express concerns that the proposed rule could significantly impact their industry and the employed workforce. Three major concerns were outlined in their comments on the proposed rule:

**1. Methodology for setting the minimum wage for EAP:** NGCOA recommends using the 20th percentile, as was done in the 2019 rule, rather than the 35th percentile of weekly earnings of full-time salaried workers in the lowest-wage Census Region (currently the South). This adjustment would more accurately reflect current market wages while offering exempt employees a reasonable minimum wage increase.

**2. Removal of the 10% limitation on commission income:** NGCOA's recently released **2024 Golf Industry Compensation and Benefits Report** revealed that commissions constitute up to 50% of affected employee wages. Restricting the inclusion of commissions in total earnings could force many employees into hourly wages, potentially limiting their overall earnings.

**3. Future updates to earnings thresholds:** NGCOA believes that the Department's proposed automatic wage increases do not account for economic conditions, regional variations, or individual business circumstances. The lack of flexibility in these updates might pose challenges for golf operators in regions with lower living costs or during economic downturns when providing wage increases might be challenging.

The NGCOA emphasizes that a thoughtful reconsideration of these aspects in the proposed rule would better serve the golf course industry and its workforce. The comment period closed on November 7, 2023. As we saw following the release of the 2016 minimum wage rule, we expect this one to land in the courts with a subsequent decision from the U.S. Supreme Court. NGCOA will continue to follow the Department's actions on this rule and provide updates as they become available. **FB**

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## VIEWPOINT MEMBERSHIP

By Rachel Carter, Sr. Director Of Membership, NGCOA | [rcarter@ngcoa.org](mailto:rcarter@ngcoa.org)

# Giving the Gift of NGCOA Membership

*Golf Business Magazine* is the official publication of the National Golf Course Owners Association, the leading authority on the business of golf course ownership and management. The NGCOA empowers owners with business-critical information, relevant and timely education, professional and meaningful networking, and crucial advocacy to operate their golf facilities as efficiently and profitably as possible.

Are you a golf course owner looking to unlock the full potential of your business? Joining the National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA) is your key to success.

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## NGCOA FACILITY FEATURE

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# DEVELOPER DESIGNS DIFFERENT GOLF CONCEPT FOR DIVERGENT TIMES

By Steve Eubanks

**I**t's one of the most desirable spots in the country, a magnet for economic migrants fleeing California as well as teleworkers who woke up to the fact that the great outdoors are a nice alternative to urban life.

You don't have to visit Skyridge Mountain Community, just off Highway 40 on the northwest shore of the Jordanelle Reservoir in Park City, to appreciate why so many people want to move there. Just look at the pictures. Lake views, mountain vistas, easy access to skiing, hiking, mountain biking, Western wilderness and a sky so blue it doesn't seem real: it makes the average commuter in LA or San Francisco want to head to Utah with nothing but the clothes on their back.



“We have just over 500 single-family lots and a hotel on the property. A good deal of the property is devoted to open space, and because of the (mountainside) location, some of the land is unbuildable. That left us with about 60 acres that we could dedicate to golf or some other amenities.”

— Mike Gladson

The partners who own Skyridge understand what they have. And they know that, like a good physician, their first commandment is to do no harm. That's why they're taking their thoughtful time, planning every square inch of their 700 acres in a way that maximizes value while maintaining the integrity of their vision.

“We have just over 500 single-family lots and a hotel on the property,” said Skyridge partner Mike Gladson. “A good deal of the property is devoted to open space, and because of the (mountainside) location, some of the land is unbuildable. That left us with about 60 acres that we could dedicate to golf or some other amenities.”

Golf is not the primary reason for building a home in Park City. The downtown area has kept its quaintness, even after Robert Redford brought Hollywood there with the Sundance Film Festival. You can still take dogs almost everywhere, including the local coffee shops, of which there are many. And you won't walk 50 feet without bumping into an extreme-sport athlete – an ultra-distance runner or Iron Man triathlete. Park Citians run marathons as warmups.

It's certainly not a new getaway. Michael Jordan and Will Smith have had homes there for years. Actress Jade Chynoweth was born in Park City. And best-selling author and former Navy SEAL Jack Carr writes his novels and runs his “Danger Close” production studios out of the area.

But the guys who own Skyridge knew that golf should be an integral part of their development. “We have a small owner group and we're all avid golfers, so we had this idea,” Gladson said. “There is a lot of great golf in the area – 18- and 36-hole facilities – but none of the public courses have invested in their practice facilities. We saw a niche there that we could fill.”

Between 2017 and 2019, the group began implementing their amenity plan. While Skyridge Mountain Community would be the name of the residential area, the amenities would be open to the public and include a hotel, an equestrian center, retail shops, restaurant, and a hybrid golf concept, which will be called The Stelle.

“We originally thought that if, in addition to the lakes and the ski resorts, we could build three full-size traditional golf holes, that would be a good start,”

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Gladson said. "At that time, we were just thinking about green-grass alternatives to a full course, maybe six loops of three holes, three loops of six holes, we weren't sure what the right mix was at that time. But we knew we wanted player development with a big, beautiful place for people to practice."

"So, in the beginning, we designed a big tee-lined practice facility and a three-hole course - a par-3 and par-4 and a par-5 - on one side of the range."

Then the pandemic hit. Like everyone else in the world, Skyridge owners were panicked about what would become of their business. But they quickly realized that they were in the right place at the right time. Fresh air, open spaces, and sunshine became hot commodities during COVID. Those were in abundance in Park City.

Golf also became the go-to recreational activity. More people started the game between 2020 and 2022 than any other time since the 1950s.

"Interest in golf boomed," Gladson said. "In addition to rounds going up everywhere, we also saw non-traditional outlets like Topgolf and Toptracer exploding."

That caused the Skyridge partners to rethink their initial amenity strategy.

"We spent a lot of time visiting non-traditional courses - par-3 courses, courses with fewer holes, and places that had really robust ranges," Gladson said. "The whole time we were planning to keep



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The architect is Jon Garner, who has 30 years of design knowledge both on his own and with Nicklaus Design.

"Then, as we looked further at the range, we decided we needed indoor stuff to extend the season to 12 months and give people more of an entertainment outlet," Gladson said.

The simulator model has been a staple in Asian countries for years. Indoor facilities are so big in Korea that simulator golf has its own professional tour with televised events on Korean television. Players even have caddies to hand them gloves and help with club selection, even though there's no wind and they're hitting shots into a simulator screen.

Venues in America are just picking up on the concept, taking a page out of the Topgolf playbook. World famous chef David Burke opened his 1776 restaurant in Morristown, New Jersey with a Topgolf Swing Suite adjacent to the main dining room. Not only did it open up casual dining, cocktails and private parties, diners now don't mind waiting an hour for a table because they can go hit balls into one of the simulators.

Private clubs are converting storage rooms or bridge nooks into simulator bays, and teaching and fitting centers are opening in strip-malls throughout America.

"We looked at a lot of simulator companies and we landed on Full Swing and Swing Suite for partners on that," Gladson said. "We're really excited about the opportunities there - leagues, fittings, lessons and F&B around the simulators."

So, the inside piece of the puzzle was set. With a bar and grill next to the simulators, golf was a year-round option. Then, Gladson and his partners reimaged their outdoor amenities.

"We began considering Toptracer Range," he said. "We got lots of feedback from places that had done it. With the weather and the technology, we realized that by building some covered bays, we could run our season for nearly 10 months. That gives us an almost cabana-style experience for golf at every level."

"From a business-model standpoint, we're confident we can draw locals from the extended community. We also have a strong connection to the military community in the area. But there is also a lot of commercial business in the Park City region - conferences, business events, that sort of thing. We've structured a lot of our programming so we can do a lot of corporate buy-out events."

"At the moment, we have 200 single-family homesites sold with probably about 50 currently on the market. There are a few subdivisions that are open. And we'll open some of the estate lots in the coming years. We have about 50 homes either occupied or under construction with more in the planning stages."

"But we're in a market where people want to go quick. So, we have to be ready for them."



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## Lessons for Life: Henry "Hank" Johnson, Jr. 1940-2023

By Doug McPherson

*"I hope it is true that a man can die and yet not only live in others but give them life, and not only life, but that great consciousness of life."*

— Jack Kerouac

Perhaps it's fitting that during the holidays – a time of hope, of love and of remembrance – we take time to honor the life of one of our own: Hank Johnson, who passed on September 1 and who served as the executive director of the Lowcountry Golf Course Owners Association on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina from 1992 to 2006. A man who, by all accounts, held an undeniable zest for life.

This column, we hope, is about learning from the life of Hank Johnson.

His family says he was first and foremost, a man of God and demonstrated that in all that he said and did. That he was a welcoming man who would do anything for his people. He was the best husband, the greatest father and grandfather and an exceptional leader.

Hank grew up in South Carolina, inquisitive, a lover of storytelling and blessed with a memory for details that brought his many stories to life. He attended Gordon Military College, The Citadel and then joined the Special Forces. He paused a short time to marry his sweetheart, DeThane McKenzie, who he cherished for 61 years. During the next 22 plus years, Hank rose from private to major.

His military awards were many and included three Bronze Stars with valor.



After the military, Hank continued his leadership and service on Hilton Head Island for 34 years – working for the Hilton Head Company, the Sea Pines Corporation, Melrose Plantation (on Daufuskie Island), the National Golf Course Owners Association, and his own company, Community Management Services.

Hank's friends – the friends he made quickly while beginning his time with the NGCOA – were eager to share their thoughts and memories of Hank.

"He was like a big teddy bear. Outgoing, very gregarious and a never-met-a-stranger type of guy. He was a unique individual who remembered every detail from 50 years ago – a great storyteller about his time growing up in South Carolina," says George Hilliard, former executive director of the Myrtle Beach Golf Course Owners Association. "He liked to hunt and fish. He was heavily involved with the community in Hilton Head. Everyone knew him there."

Cary Corbitt, former president of the Lowcountry Golf Course Owners Association, says Hank was someone you could call on anytime.

"I actually called him three weeks before he passed to ask him some things. We spoke for about 20 minutes. He was in great spirits," Corbitt says. "He was gentle and kind, he had tremendous values. I always enjoyed hearing about his past in the military and his passion for the country. He was a military man from deep down and was proud of it."



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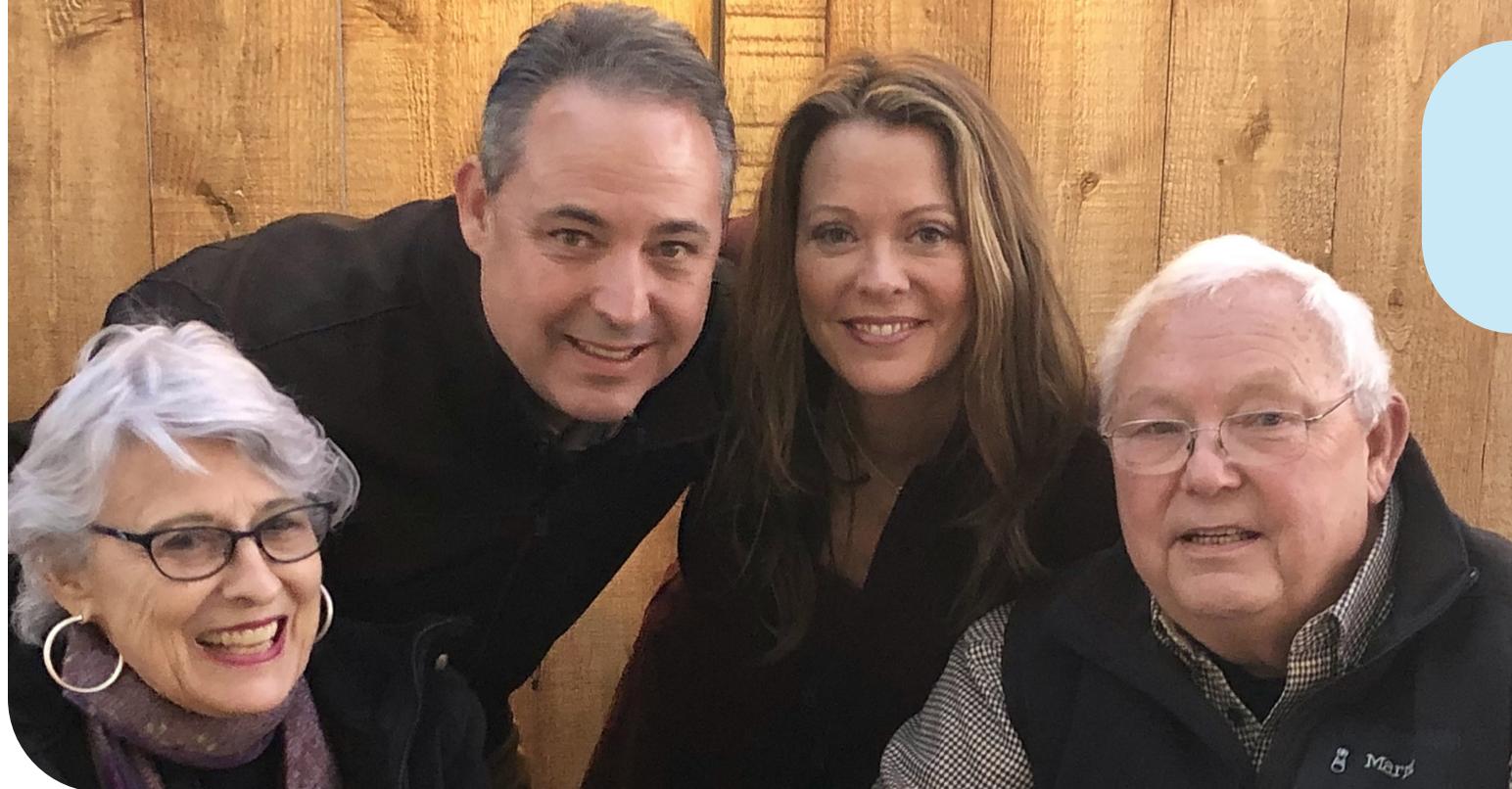
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Rock Lucas, former NGCOA president and owner of Charwood Golf Club in West Columbia, South Carolina, served with Hank for many years.

"Hank would always keep you laughing," Lucas says. "He was full of what I call 'Hankisms,' or sayings. One of his favorites was when he was doing something difficult, he'd say it was like herding cats. He told me once that if someone owes you money, go to their church service Sunday morning and meet them outside the front door on the steps in front of the pastor and ask them about that money they owe you." Lucas adds "He made you feel like he's known you all your life and that you were his best friend – that you knew you could depend on him and he would be there for you."

Terry Sedalik, executive director of the South Carolina Golf Course Owners Association in Charleston, first met Hank 25 years ago and describes him as a patriot, down to earth, friendly, jovial, candid and family oriented.

"He was well known for his long-term relationships and loyalty," Sedalik says. "And he made a significant contribution to golf by building a team of members in the Lowcountry that enabled substantial accomplishments for the golf industry."

And Mike Tinkey, past president of the Hilton Head Island Golf Course Owners Association, talks about the early 1990s when he was in the first stages of forming the Lowcountry association – a time when the economy was tanking and developer dollars were scarce.

"It was obvious that we would need an executive director to conduct the business of advocacy, group purchasing, research, benchmarking of facility operations, organizing a golf coupon book to raise funds for destination marketing, and much more," Tinkey says. "So I met with people from Sea Pines, Palmetto Dunes and a few others, and I asked them who'd be the best person to help me.

I thought I'd get a few names, but everyone I spoke to gave me just one name: Hank Johnson. Why was that? I soon learned."

Tinkey says he came to understand that people trusted Hank with their life. And a story from Hank's time in Vietnam explains why.

"He was a get-the-job-done kind of man. Even if he had no support, he'd make it happen on his own. In Vietnam, our forces were running low on helicopters, which they needed to get supplies delivered. Hank found out where they made helicopters and he went there, lived there, to make sure the helicopters got back into production. So with Hank, there was no BS, just get it done."

And all of these men say Hank – the way he went about his work with NGCOA – left lessons for those who work in the world of golf today.

For starters, they say it's key to remember that you're in the people business. George Hilliard says Hank knew practically everyone on Hilton Head.

"He definitely knew the stakeholders and was able to build strong alliances with them – to spearhead the activities that needed to be done," Hilliard says.

One example was creating the tee time reservation system. "He knew how to get the right work done for any project," Hilliard says.

Cary Corbitt agrees and says Hank offered himself up for the incorporation of Lowcountry.

"They needed a manager and he had proven management skills. I think everyone felt comfortable with Hank coming in and doing what needed to be done," Corbitt says. "He had a good mind for business. He had contractors and was involved with the Chamber of Commerce. Hank was on the front of all of that."

Corbitt adds that part of Hank's people skills was being a good listener.

**“**We'd never lose a war if there were more Hank Johnsons. I stayed in touch with him because I loved being with him. When you were with him, it was like being with goodness."

– Mike Tinkey

"He was a great listener, he really heard what people were saying, and then he would weigh a situation and then make a decision," Corbitt says. "I think we all can learn from Hank and the demeanor he brought to the table."

And finally, another lesson: Understand that leadership is about service. Rock Lucas says Hank's contribution to golf came directly in the form of leadership.

"He was a true leader. And leaders lead by serving others. It was, 'How can I help you? What can I do to make your job or life easier?' He would find what you needed or what your problems were and help solve them," Lucas says. "He helped local owners on Hilton Head Island and across the state save money on expenses and helped generate revenue via destination golf travel. He once set up a bulk purchase program [where] owners would place their orders with Hank, and he'd place a bulk order out of Oregon ... saving thousands of dollars. The next year, seed prices miraculously came down."

Mike Tinkey says Hank would say the golf industry could either fail separately or succeed by working together.

"Hank had a way of working with people – to get them to work with each other. They'd share financials to get economies of scale and they'd see grass seed go from 90 cents a pound to 50 cents a pound," Tinkey says. "He was able to get Hilton Head working with Myrtle Beach and Charleston to get a financial impact statement together for the state legislature so that they understood that for each dollar spent on golf in South Carolina, seven dollars came back to the state."

Tinkey says one thing to remember about Hank was he was "just impeccable – his ability to get things done with trust and respect – was amazing. Whatever the battle was, he was in it completely."

"We'd never lose a war if there were more Hank Johnsons. I stayed in touch with him because I loved being with him. When you were with him, it was like being with goodness."

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## FORWARD PRESS

WITH MICHAEL WILLIAMS



Photo credit: Pizá Golf

# THE MOST INTERESTING MAN IN GOLF

For 25 years, award-winning architect Agustín Pizá has garnered a reputation for “redefining golf facilities” with his unique design concepts – Wellness Golf®, Multi-purpose Golf, and the Butterfly Effect. He is recognized by Forbes Magazine as one of the top one hundred inventive minds from Mexico and Golf Inc. Magazine featured him as one of the top-five visionaries in the golf industry.

Pizá and his design team have worked and have been involved in more than seventy projects on three continents. He has worked on world-class golf developments and his designs are known for delivering quality, aesthetic, and strategic golf courses.

Most recently, Pizá joined forces with PGA TOUR Champion, and Golf Channel Analyst – Brandel Chamblee. The newly formed Pizá Chamblee partnership will expand the Pizá Golf Branded Collection and their signature Pizá Chamblee golf designs are available on select projects. The duo is working on projects in both the United States and in Mexico.

But Pizá is much more than his golf resume. He is a man of intellect, compassion and insight about the human condition. He is just as comfortable talking about art and philosophy as he is about fairways and greens. It is lucky for the golf community that he chooses to express his considerable talents through golf course design. Below is an excerpt from a recent interview with Pizá.

**Q: When did you first know you wanted to be a golf course architect?**

**Agustín Pizá:** That's a tricky one. When I was a student, I knew that I wanted to become an architect; I'm a regular building architect student and I'm a licensed vertical architect but I was brought up in sports all my life. My parents are PE teachers, my great uncle, was the first Mexican student to swim across the English Channel and he was a stunt double for Johnny Weissmuller in the original Tarzan movies! I came from a family of sports tradition

and I just wanted and wondered how I could mix sports with architecture. I discovered golf architecture and got the opportunity to pursue my two passions. This all happened when I was 24 - 25 years old and I've been in the industry 25 years now.

**Q: What does it mean to you to work with great players and great architects who have so much input into the game? What impacts you most about your interactions with them?**

**AP:** I try to soak everything in. My first seven years in the industry were all working for the construction company or as a junior project manager. For example, when I was working at Palmilla and Eldorado down in Cabo, I was actually working for Paragon, which is Jack Nicklaus' company, but I didn't know at the time. Obviously I wanted to be in the design part of it, but I didn't know at the time that knowing about the construction, knowing about what goes on underneath that skin, made me a stronger architect for the future.

So, imagine your first two courses being two Jack Nicklaus signatures, and then your third with Tom Fazio. Tom did South of the Border in 1999, about that time. It's been an absolute privilege.

There's the aesthetics of Tom Fazio, the resort-style from Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player who likes to push sustainability a lot. With all of them, I learned something and then complimented it with my master's degree in golf course architecture. I traveled to the University of Edinburgh to study and live for two years to obtain my master's degree in golf course architecture and work for a Scottish architect over there, which gave me the other side of the spectrum, which is the more introverted, more sustainable aspect of golf design. I combined that with the bigger, bolder type of design that we have here or that we have in the States or Mexico and it's a great balance that I've learned in my career.



Photo credit: Bert McLendon Photography

Agustin Pizá and colleague Brandel Chamblee enjoy a fireside chat with Golf Business Conference emcee Kraig Kann

**Q: Let's talk a little bit about the innovation. It seems that every resort and destination is installing a short course. But I think you saw this coming before anybody else did. What did you see before everybody else saw about the importance and the attraction of the short course?**

**AP:** Let's start with this, Michael, because the great ideas are out there in the universe. I think it was the beginning of 2017 when we started at our design studio. We started by thinking critically about what everybody has been doing all this time that we can do differently.

And we created a list on the whiteboard saying, golf is intimidating, golf is judgmental, it's pricey, it's time-consuming, it's land consuming, it's resource consuming. So we had that list; now how can we create something that's the opposite of that list? Why can't we start designing for the 97% of the population that are out there that are non-golfers? So you see from that year on, everything we're talking about is the non-golfers, we're talking about creating the opposite of that list. So we created Wellness Golf (at Chablé Resort near Merida in Mexico), a 10-acre site with four acres of grass that has multi-purpose combinations including golf.

It's not intimidating, it's inviting, it uses fewer resources, and it's more fun (and sustainable). It started to create a better ROI for our clients because all of a sudden the grandfather's playing with the granddaughter, the mother's playing with the son or the daughter, and they've never even thought about going to the big course. It was just like all of a sudden you start to see all this behavior and even walking out with the dog or playing barefoot because we do encourage earthing.

So it's more sustainable, but it's also an approach to where you can relax and think about things and enjoy the 360 degrees that golf courses offer. We're so busy looking at the slope, the rating, the scorecard, et cetera, that you don't stop and watch and listen to the birds and look around you. Everybody's so busy, everybody's thinking that they have to be at work and live at 120 miles an hour. And no, we don't have to. 2020 had to come along to show us that.

**Q: What makes a "world-class" course, if we want to use that term?**

**AP:** The "why" is the most important thing, the purpose of why you are doing this. It's like a good paper, like a good written novel, a good written book, a good play, a good artistic movie. It has to have the intention, the plot, the rising action, the climax, the surprise ending; that structure is how we like to design a good 18-hole golf course. That is the structure that we believe in. So, we have that backbone that the golf course really creates a dialogue with nature and with the player.

You've probably heard of "signature" golf courses. We don't believe in the signature golf course. We believe that nature gives it its signature. On top of that, we think about a design in two dimensions on paper. We like to create a treasure map, a fantastic treasure map that takes you through the different elements of that particular site. If it has a little bit of mangroves, if it has a little bit of forest up in the hills, down beaches, whatever. We highlight those areas and we want to take you exploring.

Then if you take it to the third dimension, the third dimension is what we call our carousel of emotions. I'm going to give you a good easy starting hole, but then I'm going to pitch it up a notch and I'll make holes three and four a little bit more difficult. And that takes you into this carousel of emotions, which is the actual experience of the golf course, of the area, of the 360 degrees. And that's part of the adventure that we like to create. That for us is the number one challenge when we create a golf course. It's how we get under your skin with every single shot through the use of the three main elements of a golf hole, which is a penal hole, a heroic hole, and a strategic hole. How do we mix that amongst the whole philosophy and strategy that we use?

We want to work with your emotions. It's not just about creating a golf course, it's creating art. To me, there's no bigger artistic expression than golf architecture. **BB**



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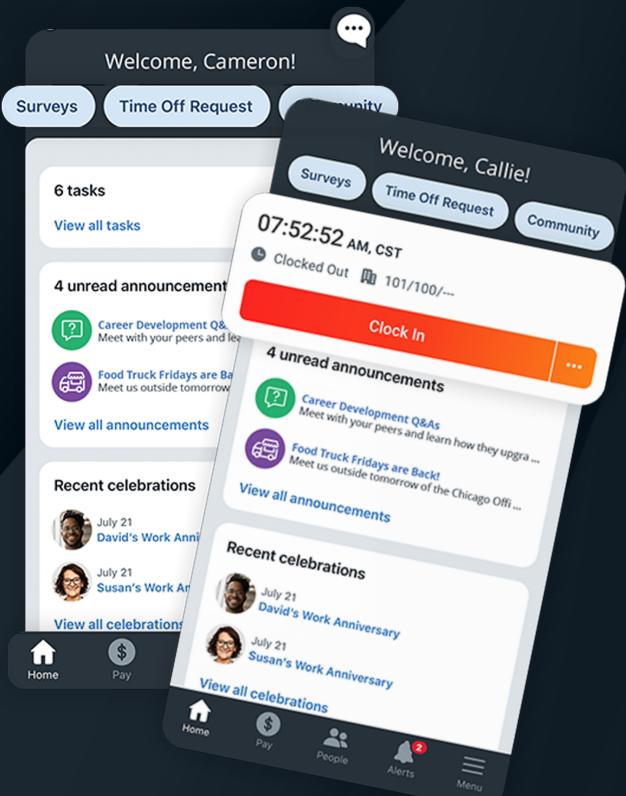
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# ALL IN ON AI

Two recent *Golf Business WEEKLY* articles by colleagues Michael Williams and Doug McPherson highlight what hit me and the attendees of TechCon23 right between the eyes in the first morning session – AI, Artificial Intelligence, is not sneaking up on us. It's here, and it's advancing quickly. Williams referred to the speaker, Paul Roetzer, who told us that AI's computing power and machine-learned intelligence doubles every three months. By comparison, "Moore's Law" fueled the semiconductor business for decades, stating that the number of transistors on an integrated circuit would double every two years. And they did.

Use any AI engine like Google Bard or ChatGPT and insert the prompt, "Write me a paper on how AI will affect golf course owners." The responses are similar, gathering data from online sources, possibly including McPherson's recent article. And if you do it again in three months, the results will likely be somewhat different.

I'm familiar with how some of the technologies you might be using already have AI embedded in the programming that may not be overtly apparent – but working on your behalf. I'm familiar with companies like Priswing, Tagmarshal, Club Caddie, Gallus Golf, ReelGOLF, and Club Prophet. This is far short of an inclusive list – they're just what I've seen. TechCon23 also featured companies in the agronomic space using AI, like Rain Bird and Turf Logic. Again, this is not an inclusive list. However, my observation is that agronomics is where artificial intelligence's most productive and effective use will first provide course operators with superior results.

NGCOA sponsor Club Caddie sent me a presentation titled "Golf Operations in 2030 – How will GMS advancements change the way your club operates?" It's an impressive document illustrating a deep dive into where and how AI will benefit course operators with their GMS systems. I don't know if other GMS providers have researched and produced the abundance of knowledge and suggestions as Club Caddie, but if they have, I'd like to review them, too.

Funny thing is, if we believe Roetzer's admonition about how fast AI is progressing, I think Club Caddie's runway is too long. As we near 2024, I'm thinking 2026-2027 will be the breakthrough years for golf GMS systems, if not sooner. Those that aren't will have a lot of catching up to do, and might fail if they don't. We could be in a whole other realm by 2030.

So, let's take a look at how Club Caddie sees AI. It first identifies and defines "Big Data" and how it flows in different forms through its GMS. It has a "Big Data Value" formula, "Massive Amount + Widespread + Real Time + Accurate = Valuable Data." Next, it illustrates how the neural networks within the software, from input to the unseen middle layers to the output, create an intelligent response or solution. These can include:

- Automated Customer Profiling and Segmentation
- Recommendation and Upselling Engines
- Personalized Promotions & Fully Automated Outreach
- Inventory Optimization and Supplier Insights
- Operational Efficiency and Resource Allocation
- Revenue Optimization and Pricing
- Feedback Analysis
- ServiceBots

The list goes on for things like member management, human resources and employee management, grounds and maintenance, and golfer/member experience.

Check back in three months. There will likely be more. To see Club Caddie's entire presentation, contact Jason Pearsall at [jason@clubcaddie.com](mailto:jason@clubcaddie.com).

## SWINGING INTO SUCCESS: EXPERT INSIGHTS FOR GOLF'S GROWING MARKET



**Ryan Rafter of Hilco Real Estate's Golf Advisory team takes time to explain how, around the country, both buyers and sellers of real estate are actively capitalizing on the resurgence of golf and the increased number of rounds being played. Tune into the podcast below!**



**LISTEN NOW**

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But I have a concern, and it involves the action plan Club Caddie and other sources recommend. I fear that the single course operator, the people I've done most of my business with for over 20 years, will be swamped by the MCOs and high-end resorts who already have or can marshal the resources to best learn, understand, and utilize AI faster and with greater deployment capabilities. Google Bard suggests how to prepare for the future of AI in golf, similar to Club Caddie's:

**Golf course owners can prepare for the future of AI by:**

- **Investing in AI technology**

There are many AI-powered solutions available that can help golf course owners to improve course management, enhance the customer experience, and reduce costs.

- **Training staff on AI**

Golf course staff should be trained on how to use AI technology to improve their performance and provide better customer service.

- **Collecting and analyzing data**

Golf course owners should collect and analyze data on a variety of factors, such as weather conditions, player traffic, and resource usage. This data can then be used to improve AI-powered systems and make better decisions about course management.

*(Note: My Grammarly Pro, which uses AI in several ways, identified five or six ways Google Bard could have written this better. I left it as is, but I'm waiting for the Marvel movie with rival AIs facing off against one another.)*

Another source suggests hiring someone with AI knowledge and training to manage the AI data and functions at a course. How many single-course operators can afford to do that? Because I can guarantee you this is not a minimum-wage job.

The key for most golf course operators, particularly those reading this and are NGCOA members, is to find and implement the best technologies that fit their needs and budgets. I don't think identifying needs will be difficult, and you'll likely find one or more technologies that do things you never dreamed of that can meet a need or create a reason to make operational changes. However, I fear that for many, money will be an issue. It will take pencil-on-paper intelligence to calculate the costs against the potential savings, revenue enhancements, and return on investment. Those who don't or can't will indeed be left behind.

I'll speak with anyone about AI as I endeavor to learn more. I immediately plan to drive about ten minutes to the Stanford University campus and stand outside the computer science building with a sign, "Need Help With AI?" Because we all will. 

# Unleash Your Business Potential at Golf Business Conference 2024

Join hundreds of your golf course business peers in Orlando, Florida for the **National Golf Course Owners Association's Golf Business Conference 2024**, Monday, January 22 through Wednesday, January 24!

The Golf Business Conference is the industry's largest annual gathering of **golf course owners, operators, general managers and others** who run golf course businesses — and also serves as NGCOA's annual meeting. GBC24 is once again co-located with the PGA Show; we encourage you to extend your time in Orlando so you can **attend the 2024 PGA Show** exhibits, activities and select education that is included with your GBC24 ticket.

Each year, this unparalleled event not only offers **relevant and timely education** delivered by expert speakers on the **most critical areas of golf course operations**, but provides a plethora of opportunities for **networking and relationship building**. Most GBC24 education will be held at the Rosen Centre Hotel (our host hotel).

As in years past, GBC24 education sessions will be eligible for **continuing education credits** from the PGA of America, as well as the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), the Club Management Association of America (CMAA), and the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA).



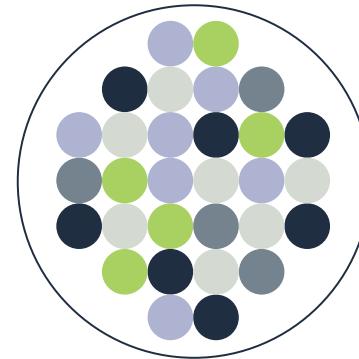
Expand your knowledge, streamline your operations, build meaningful connections — all to strengthen and grow your golf course business at GBC24.



## Who should attend #GBC24?

- Golf Course Owners, Operators, Managers and anyone else who is responsible for the success of a golf course business
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- Buyers for Golf Facilities and Courses
- PGA Professionals and others who are interested in becoming an owner or operator

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#### Your GBC24 Full Conference Pass Includes:

- Sunday afternoon Masterminds Pre-Conference Session (no charge; pre-registration required)
- Monday New Member & First-Timer Reception and Opening Reception
- Tuesday Breakfast, General Business Meeting and Education Sessions, Lunch, Sponsor Fair & Happy Hour
- Wednesday Breakfast, Education Sessions and Awards Luncheon
- Access to the 2024 PGA Show Exhibition Hall
- Access to select 2024 PGA Show education sessions

#### Be Sure to Add ONE of These Activities to Your GBC24 Registration (additional fee required):

- Monday Yamaha Golf Outing
- Monday Pre-Conference Master Class at Orange Lake Resort
- Tuesday Golf Course Owners Dinner

## Yamaha Golf Outing

(additional registration and fee required)

Monday, January 22

Reunion Resort & Golf Club – Palmer Course

Sprawling out over hilly, rolling terrain, the Palmer Course offers 6,916 yards of engaging play with elevation changes up to 50 feet. It is the perfect 18 holes for fun and friendly competition (and prizes at the close!).

Register soon — this event always fills up fast! Breakfast, lunch and post-round reception are included, golf attire required.



## Sponsor Fair & Happy Hour

Rosen Centre Hotel

This is your chance to meet the people and companies that support GBC24 and the NGCOA! Enjoy a beverage while you take a lap around the ballroom to peruse the various booths, meet the sponsors, learn about their products and services, and continue your networking with owner and operator peers.

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#### Tips:

- Book your room(s) at the Rosen Centre Hotel, the official host hotel, **by December 8**. The NGCOA group block fills quickly so don't wait!
- Arrive on Sunday, January 21 if you're playing in the Yamaha Golf Outing on Monday morning
- Stay through Friday, January 26 to benefit from select PGA Show education, and to visit NGCOA booth #2479, the NGCOA Vendor Village, and the expansive OCCC Exhibition Hall.



## 2024 PGA Show

The PGA Show returns to Orlando, January 23-26, 2024. Our continuing strategic alliance with the PGA of America enables you to attend select PGA-led education, an incredible exhibition venue to learn about the latest trends and suppliers, and ample opportunities to discover innovative products and services to run a better golf operation.

Visit the extensive and impressive PGA Show Exhibit Hall within the Orange County Convention Center (OCCC)! GBC24 attendees will have access to these PGA Show features, activities and events:

- Opening Ceremony and Full Exhibit Hall Access
- PGA Show Live Fashion Show
- The Clubhouse
- PGA of America Hub
- Golf Industry Career Zone
- Equipment Test Center
- Golf Fitness, Wellness & Instruction
- New Product Zone
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Photography courtesy of Maple Hill Golf/Jason Sanchez

# JUNIOR PROGRAMMING INNOVATES Toward a New Era

By David Gould

**While some of us weren't paying attention, junior golf promotion changed.**

Programs and concepts for ushering kids into golf and retaining them as players got smarter, more nuanced and more efficient. At the same time, they extended their outreach considerably further into underserved communities.

Until fairly recently, there was a hit-and-hope mindset to junior promotion and a constant uphill battle against soccer, lacrosse and all the other team sports intent on signing kids up. Golf has justifiably called itself the game for a lifetime because playing it does not require running, jumping or making physical contact. When we're young, however, we love to do those things.

A series of National Golf Foundation studies from the 20-teens showed how proactive golf needed to become in order to grab a spot on the busy sports schedules of school-age children. Forward-thinking instructors and program managers apparently took note, revising their golf intro sessions to make them dramatically less stiff and static.

If you're committed to the idea that a school-age child learning golf has to stand in one place the whole time, that's a huge barrier to success. What's been proven to work is game-based activity with an athletic warmup component, adding colorful props and creating an overall atmosphere of fun."

— Kaycee Wilke



Photo credit: SCGA

"If you're committed to the idea that a school-age child learning golf has to stand in one place the whole time, that's a huge barrier to success," says Kaycee Wilke, the director of Player and Youth Development for the Southern California Golf Association. "What's been proven to work is game-based activity with an athletic warmup component, adding colorful props and creating an overall atmosphere of fun." There's a significant Titleist Performance Institute (TPI) component to the programming Wilke oversees—programming that earned the SCGA a 2022 NGCOA Player Development Award. "The idea is to turn kids into athletes who are proficient at golf, which was a non-traditional approach—but we've seen it take hold."

Her fellow Californian in youth golf development, Matt Clay, was an early adopter of TPI-based thinking as an entry path for kids into golf. Clay, the general manager of the Del Mar Golf Center north of San Diego, was asked at one point how to position that mindset to the moms and dads of prospective young students.

"We play dodgeball and parents ask why—the new parents," says Clay. "I tell them it teaches spatial awareness, proprioception, speed, agility and a strong rotational move of the torso." That right there, folks, is hardcore golf-swing technique, athletic fundamental by athletic fundamental. Along with just plain making sense, it's a persuasive form of coach-parent communication.

Experimentation of this nature has liberated the modern junior golfer and made the royal and ancient game seem like what it is—an actual sport. SNAG, which Wilke's program includes at the 5- to 7-year-old level, brought in bright colors and made it almost impossible to whiff. Into the mix came US Kids Golf to disrupt the equipment facet of the youth golf market (adding a highly successful tournament network under its own brand). Operation36 pulled the beginning golfer—young kids included—all the way up to a spot just 25 feet from the hole, and said let's make par from here, then follow that with pars from 50 feet, 100 feet, etc., all the way back to the regulation tees.

On the East Coast a golf professional with expertise in early childhood development, Kate Tempesta, successfully brought golf to children as young as age 3 through an invention of her own, Birdie Basics. On the West Coast a similarly creative pro named Trapper Perkins developed Tiny Tees—likewise a pathway into golf that could start as soon as your tiny golfer was out of diapers. Arriving to steal a march on those other team sports, PGA Junior League Golf was all about uniforms, camaraderie and golf as a social vehicle. The program's success was pretty much immediate and has only continued on its upward path.

This surge of innovation, Op36 included, wasn't merely a series of interesting wrinkles—it was downright essential to the movement beyond hit-and-hope.

"We were running junior golf camps the old way, putting everything we had into it, and losing players instead of increasing our numbers," recalls Ryan Dailey of his early work in North Carolina with partner Matt Reagan. "It was either invent a whole new way of turning beginners into golfers or give up altogether."

Among the trails blazed by Op36 on its highly experimental path was a data-rich approach that gave players and coaches constant tracking of engagement level and performance improvement. "What gets measured gets managed," as the business axiom goes, and it's true whether you're building widgets or turning kids into golf enthusiasts.

Golf industry people are admirably candid about the pandemic's immense positive impact on business activity. This is well and good, but it shouldn't cause out-of-the-box thinking to go unrecognized and undervalued. New ideas and attitudes "have made golf mainstream for kids," says Jason Sanchez, general manager of the 18-hole Maple Hill golf complex in Grandville, Michigan. "Kids are proud to be golfers now, and that's a dramatic shift from how things used to be."

The stats back that statement up: Reporting from the National Golf Foundation showed that 3.4 million juniors played golf on a regulation course in 2022, which was the most since 2006. The 900,000-player increase in junior turnout over the period 2020 through 2022 makes juniors the highest-performing Covid-era participa-



Photography courtesy of Maple Hill Golf/Jason Sanchez

tion segment of all—and it stands as the most diverse, as well. Some 37 percent of today's juniors are girls—that is compared to 15 percent in 2000. More than 25 percent are non-Caucasian, a critical jump from two decades ago, when a mere 6 percent were minorities.

Like Kaycee Wilke, Sanchez has earned an NGCOA national award for junior player development. He shares a penchant for originality with the Reagan-Dailey team at Operation 36—in fact, his need to push the envelope displays an intensity all its own. Now age 44, he's held a position of responsibility at Maple Hill for two decades. "Back when I started, our junior clinics were lousy," he recalls. "The guys running them were grumpy-ranger types who didn't want to be there. I had some ideas for how we could do better."

The quality of his ideas can be measured in turnout and revenue. In 2023, Maple Hill took in \$158,000 in sign up fees alone. The add-on spend was extremely significant, as one would expect, especially given what a retail powerhouse the Maple Hill golf shop (physical and online) has become under third-generation course owners Andy and Bob Kitchin. "Going back seven years, our junior program served 800 kids," says Sanchez. "This year we got that number up to 1,450." Not so long ago the program had 200 kids at its Pee Wee entry level, and now that segment numbers 700-plus.

Maple Hill needs personnel by the busload to run this junior operation, a circumstance that keeps Sanchez on the recruitment trail all year round. But the sport's newly won coolness factor, and the whole proud-to-be-golfers phenomenon, makes staffing far more doable. Starting players young, as Pee Wees, leads to some of the junior golfers spending their entire childhoods at Maple Hill. They join the junior program as volunteers, then as paid staffers, and some of them "graduate to become shop assistants," Jason adds.

Indeed, the initial surge in junior-promotion success at the facility came when a corps of high school and college girls were hired

“

Going back seven years, our junior program served 800 kids. This year we got that number up to 1,450." Not so long ago the program had 200 kids at its Pee Wee entry level, and now that segment numbers 700-plus.

— Jason Sanchez



Photography courtesy of Maple Hill Golf/Jason Sanchez

as counselors. "They created a 'safe zone' for grade-school and teen girls to try golf," Jason says. "Moms would come up to me all the time and say their 10-year-old daughter loves this or that counselor. That one change to our operation put things on a new path."

What came next was the development of a full-circle process, in which grade-schoolers who started out as newbie golf students would end up years later helping run things. In the case of Maple Hill, alumni are making it all the way to university campuses that feed the golf industry with highly trained graduates. "We've got five kids from our program who are either currently [in the Professional Golf Man-

agement program] at Ferris State University or they're headed there next year," says Sanchez, with unmistakable pride.

The camper-to-counselor track has been a fundamental part of other junior-promotion hotspots, including Cedar Crest Golf Course in South Dallas, Texas, under the guidance of golf professional Ira Molayo and community leader Dave Ridley. The staff Molayo supervises is primarily African-American, from the streets and neighborhoods surrounding the golf course—just as Molayo himself was. "What Cedar Crest and the I Am a Golfer program combine to do is impact 100 kids every year," says Molayo, "from

the 70-plus in our golf program, to the internships and jobs held down here by 14 young people, to our college scholarships in support of eight students."

To see the game morph from an acquired taste that is difficult to acquire into something much more culturally mainstream is both a reward and a relief for its top junior promoters. As the Operation 36 founders discovered long ago, high dropout rates have been endemic to beginner programs, leading to the oft-heard phrase "leaky bucket" to describe the short-duration stays of so many new entrants. Kaycee Wilke of the SCGA puts a constant, intense effort into countering that phenomenon.

"What we do at SCGA Junior is quite unique in the golf space," Wilke contends, "in that we go very 'deep' with our kids. Introducing kids to golf is just the beginning—we commit to serving every age and every skill level, so that a participant never has to leave the program." To make that commitment is to confront course-access challenges not for the faint of heart, especially in the wake of the golf-participation catalyst called Covid. "It's a huge issue for us, because we're working with course operators who are running a business focused on weekend activity and our clientele—young kids—are available generally on weekends to participate."

Wilke works closely with Los Angeles County and its director of community engagement, Jorge Badel, to secure needed assets. She cites American Golf Corporation as another loyal friend of her program and its constituencies. In the city of Norwalk, California, the Don Knabe Golf Center is "extremely junior-friendly," says Wilke, to the point where "we have programming there seven days a week." The county has policies in place that regulate fees for her kids, keeping them as low as \$88 for eight weeks' participation, with financial-assistance opportunities that can knock the fee down by as much as 90 percent.

In a previous era for junior golf out-

reach, criticism would often be aimed at programs that produced lots of competitive youngsters bound for the elite ranks and youth tournament circuits, as though this couldn't happen unless it came at the expense of the general community. Today, leaders like Wilke and Sanchez view advanced skill development as natural and logical outgrowths of a well-run system that kids stay in throughout much of their childhood and youth.

"Our next step is to start a regional junior tour based here in Grand Rapids," says Sanchez, resolutely. "There's a need for one, and a clear demand for it, and no one else seems to want to do it."

Wilke acknowledges the unintended consequences for junior development programs that seem to turn children into mini tour pros, but feels it can be mitigated against. "We emphasize the value of developing kids as athletes, with good fitness, along the way to them becoming golfers," she says. "So, yeah, to see six-year-olds taking private golf lessons seems weird, and it can often lead to burnout, which is the exact opposite of our goal."

Parents have to be educated against over-enthusiasm, she feels. That being said, today's kids seem to be getting better at golf faster, partly due to technology and improved training practices. And if introducing underprivileged children to golf is a good idea in the first place, helping them reach their full potential in the game can hardly be mistaken thinking.

"We have an Advanced Player Program and we just launched a Junior Golf Assistance Fund," Wilke says. "It gives grants to players to travel to tournaments, or to afford a trainer or swing coach. These are players with the talent but not the money to reach

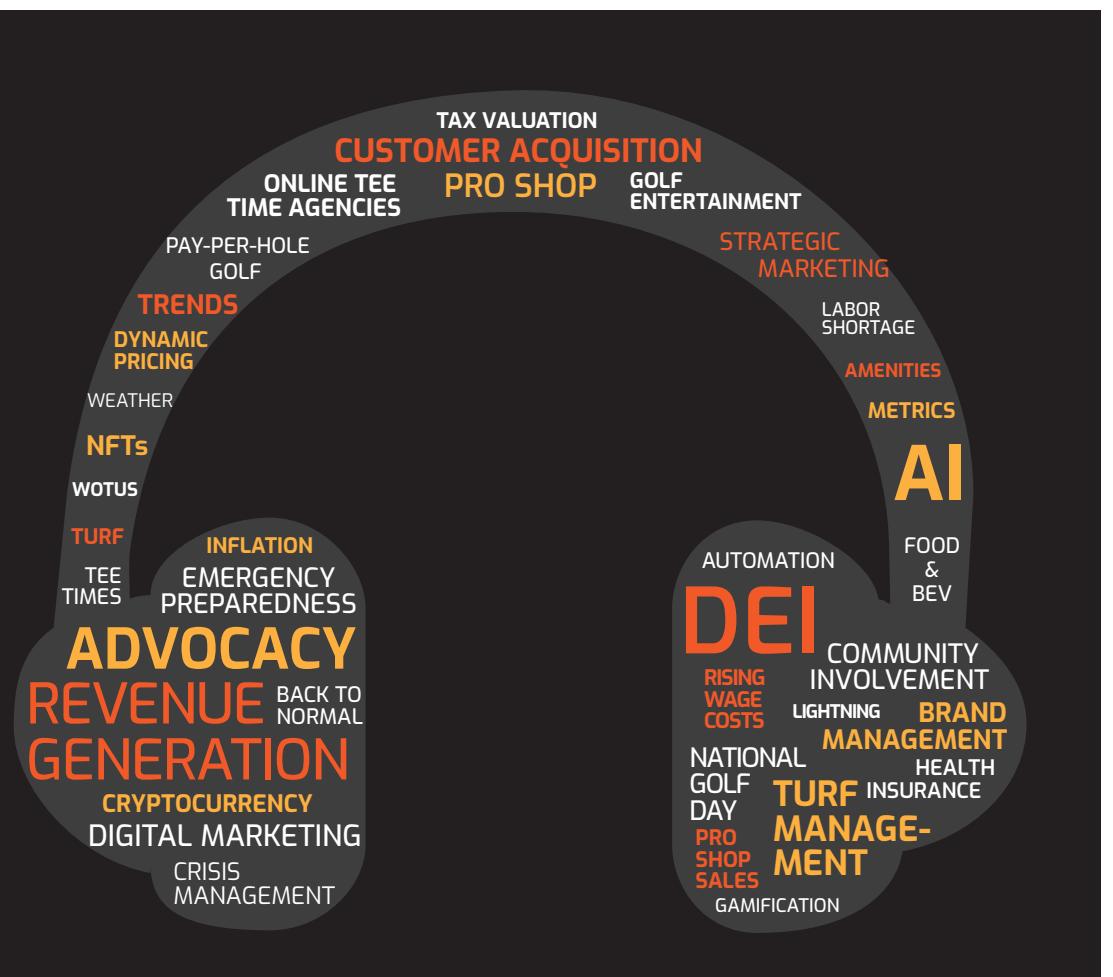


Photography courtesy of Maple Hill Golf/Jason Sanchez

the performance levels you need to earn a Division 1 college golf scholarship, so we're finding the money to solve for that."

As these case studies and anecdotes reveal, innovation and push-the-envelope thinking haven't simply taken junior development to new and lofty levels, they've also

created some top-performing programs that are hard for the rank and file to keep up with. The hope is that disseminating best practices, plus further use of data to track success rates, will exert a spread-the-wealth effect and bring best-in-class programming to communities all across the map. **FB**



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## GOLF COURSE MARKET – GIVING GOLF 2023

By Scott Kauffman



Every golf owner and operator in the business knows full well how their golf properties are used as influential vehicles for good in a variety of ways. Not the least of which is from a fund-raising component.

Indeed, for as long as the game and business has seemingly existed, surrounding communities and philanthropic organizations have been the main beneficiary of golf's long standing giving nature and, of course, through all those ubiquitous public and private club events and charity tournaments that annually appear on calendars from coast to coast.

At the recent National Golf Day events held in Washington, D.C. in May 2023, every major golf organization celebrated the game's growing \$101.7 billion economy and announced the industry's annual charitable impact is now nearly \$4.6 billion.

To be sure, no golf entity raises more money for charities than the mighty PGA TOUR. For instance, the TOUR announced in January 2020 a record amount of \$203.4 million in charitable giving was generated the previous year, pushing the all-time total past \$3 billion.

Perhaps what was more remarkable than crossing this \$3 billion mark for the first time was the fact the milestone came just six years after the TOUR reached \$2 billion in 2014 – which was nine years after the first billion was recorded in 2005. So the rate of these impressive billion-dollar incremental flows of charitable giving is occurring faster than ever before.

Not surprisingly, just as the TOUR's tournament purses have grown by leaps in bounds in recent years, so has the charitable aspect of the business. Consider the fact it took 67 years for the TOUR to cross the \$1 billion threshold, beginning with the 1938 Palm Beach Invitational – recognized for being the first event to have a charitable impact.

Of course, golf's philanthropic roots dramatically affect society in more ways than just monetarily. The First Tee is perhaps one of the industry's most successful youth-oriented initiatives that not only makes the game more accessible but helps empower future generations with life and social skills the unique game affords so many.

“Despite uncertain economic times, Americans demonstrated how essential they view the nonprofit sector and its ability to solve big problems—by still giving nearly half a trillion dollars in 2022.”

— **Josh Birkholtz**

Meanwhile, the National Golf Course Owners Association is proud to be a prominent change agent as it relates to growing the game and industry's minority footprint. For instance, the NGCOA hosted an industry-first event in 2021

– the Lead Golf Together (LGT) Summit, designed as an opportunity for the leaders of golf's allied organizations to specifically address the pronounced lack of diversity on executive teams and governing boards throughout the sport and industry. The NGCOA was also the first of golf's allied organizations to sponsor the inaugural African American Golf Expo and Forum in 2021.

But back to the lifeblood of many course operations -- charity tournaments -- the question that begs to be asked is whether the 12 million-plus participants that annually take part in more than 143,000 fundraising events are still doing their part to give back despite a fragile economy and out-of-control inflation in the past couple years.

If the Giving USA Foundation's latest June 2023 report is any indication, America's overall generosity didn't wane one bit in 2022. Did last year's giving reach the same record highs the Foundation saw in 2020 and 2021? No.

But donors still overcame stock market volatility, dramatic spikes in inflation and other economic and global concerns to give almost \$500 billion.

“Despite uncertain economic times, Americans demonstrated how essential they view the nonprofit sector and its ability to solve big problems—by still giving nearly half a trillion dollars in 2022,” said Josh Birkholtz, Chair of Giving USA Foundation.

By comparison, in 2020 and 2021, the pandemic, economic crisis and racial justice issues combined to galvanize givers, leading to the two best years on record for charitable giving. In 2021, giving surpassed \$500 billion for the first time.

Then, Americans showed up once again in 2022, proving whenever there's a crisis or need, they rise to the occasion. Just as golf owners and operators have been doing for generations, using their facilities to drive these causes as much as any other business in America. ■



# DATA ATTACKS GOLF'S OLDEST AND MOST PERSISTENT PROBLEM

By Steve Eubanks

**T**he problem is as old as the game, and so are the debates on how to fix it.

Ask any operator or any golfer to list their top-five gripes and “slow play” will fall somewhere near the top. For the player, it’s a maddening mixture of frustration and resignation, the kind of thing that drives many out of the game or at least away from more rounds than they might otherwise play. But for the operator, it’s a financial disaster. Footfalls on the first tee are the revenue engine of every club – public, private, resort or hybrid. Slow play limits rounds and reduces revenue. Full stop. Anything that can remedy that ailment is welcome news.

Enter Tagmarshal, a digital tracking product that does a good deal more than tell an operator where his slow groups are located.

According to Bodo Sieber, the CEO of Tagmarshal, “The idea for the system came, as you might expect, during a very slow round of golf. My two partners played and were backed up with three groups waiting on the 14th hole. As often happens, they were saying, ‘Where is the marshal?’ When they got back, they came to me and said, ‘You’re a tech geek. Is there not something we can do to solve this?’”

In the past, the answer has been, no. In a private club setting, the staff knows who the slow players are. There are rarely any mysteries among members. On the resort and public front, a marshal can only do so much. The guy shooting 140 paid the same fees as the single-digit handicap behind him. And when the tee sheet is full, letting a group or two play through doesn’t do much to solve the problem.

Clubs have tried building “time pars” into their GPS systems so messages flash when you’re behind. Unfortunately, golfers either ignore those messages or find them infuriating. The most hostile interactions on any given day occur when the marshal rolls up and says, “You guys are out of position and need to pick it up.”

“The standard GPS system that you have on your typical golf cart is of great front-end value to the golfer,” Sieber said. “You can see how far you are from the flagstick, get a video flyover of the hole or at least a graphic overview, and maybe order some food for the turn. But there aren’t really back-end business applications there.”

“Of course, the commercial engine at a course is high-quality rounds. Maximizing quality and quantity adds value. Given a course’s high fixed-cost base, any additional capacity you create is bottom-line profit. It’s like adding three more rows of seats to an airliner and selling them. The fixed costs remain the same.”

With that in mind, Sieber, the tech geek, created a device-and-software interface that tracks every player on the course and also provides impressive backend data to the management team. For cart riders, the device looks like your standard GPS. For walkers, it looks like a small cell phone that’s clipped to the golf bag or given to a caddie.

“With the data we can generate, we add so much more value than the initial vision of making golf faster. We really have built a powerful business engine that looks at everything from round-time-per-hole to tee-box-wait-times as well as breakdowns of flow over particular times of day or particular days of the week. This allows the course to optimize everything from staffing to pin placements to ensure that the flow of play is consistent, and the quality of the experience is really high.”

“We are also finding that you can do it with fewer resources. Technology addresses the difficult conversations that you must have with slow players. The poor marshal that comes up upon seeing a gap between groups encounters problems because of the quality of the knowledge. The players will often say, ‘We don’t care that we’re behind,’ or ‘Where you were an hour ago when we were held up?’ or ‘I paid \$150 to play here today, so get out of my face.’”

“With this technology, many courses simply do away with marshals altogether because that relationship is always adversarial. Instead, one of the assistants or other shop personnel goes out as a ‘play ambassador’ or some other name, armed with the data. They know exactly where to go because they know exactly where the hold-up is. And they arrive armed with data on how long a group has taken to play each shot on each hole. That person then helps the group catch up by being with them and subtly showing them ways to move. Not

“We have built a system that displays a heat map of where people go and where they don’t go, so you can track that over time.”

— Bodo Sieber

once has the staffer needed to say, ‘You’re slow.’ It’s just showing them data and helping them move along.”

A decade ago, players might have balked at having the creepy eye of Big Brother attached to their golf bag. But with GPS tracking in cell phones, cars, computers and appliances, and AirTags being attached to everything from keys to pet collars, people have become accustomed to a tracking world.

“At first, we were finding that people asked what it was all about, especially if they’ve been given a device to put on their golf bags,” Sieber said. “But once it’s explained that this is to eliminate slow play, they all said, ‘Thank goodness.’ There is no resistance after that.”

As of this writing, the Tagmarshal system is on 500 courses in 14 countries, with some impressive clients on the list. Baltusrol and Erin Hills were early adopters. Whistling Straits, Kiawah, Bandon Dunes, Oakmont, Pinehurst, even the DP World Tour and the R&A use the system for certain data points.

And while the system was not originally built as an agronomic tool, the value to superintendents and general managers is astronomical.

“We have built a system that displays a heat map of where people go and where

natural grasses, we could speed up play on this hole by six minutes.’ Conversely, sometimes you might want to make a hole more difficult and a little slower to open up a bottleneck that naturally occurs ahead. We can show the impact that these incremental changes make over long periods of time.

“Pinehurst has looked at another variable: green speeds. Obviously, if your speeds are tour grade, the weekend golfer is going to struggle, and pace-of-play will deteriorate. Operators have to find a balance. Guests want a major-championship-caliber experience, but they also want to play in a reasonable time. Pinehurst has used the system to determine at what green speed play is optimized.

“It’s actually about 25% slower than what the USGA recommends as a standard green speed, because of the course design and the number of rounds that they play.”

A superintendent can also track his equipment to know exactly how long it takes to mow or maintain each area. And he can interface with the golf shop to see if there are any gaps in play so the crew can slip out and get some work done.

“The art of business intelligence is to make data actionable and easy to digest,” Sieber said. “We realize that the majority of our market is not Baltusrol or Pinehurst. It’s Average Joe golf courses with \$2.5 to \$3 million in revenue. Those operators don’t have time to dig into the data like a major championship venue, so we have a level of the system that is appropriate for them.”

“That’s what Baltusrol did during its renovation. As Gil Hanse looked at the Lower Course, the club provided him with the heat-map data, which made it much easier for Hanse to return certain areas to nature.

“There is also a function of traffic control,” Sieber said. “Obviously, there are areas where you are not supposed to go, especially with a cart. The superintendent can tell where to put signage or put fencing or how to change the course.

“That is so vital because course planners can now look at the data and say, ‘If we just took out this one bush or this one tree or converted this one area back to clay or



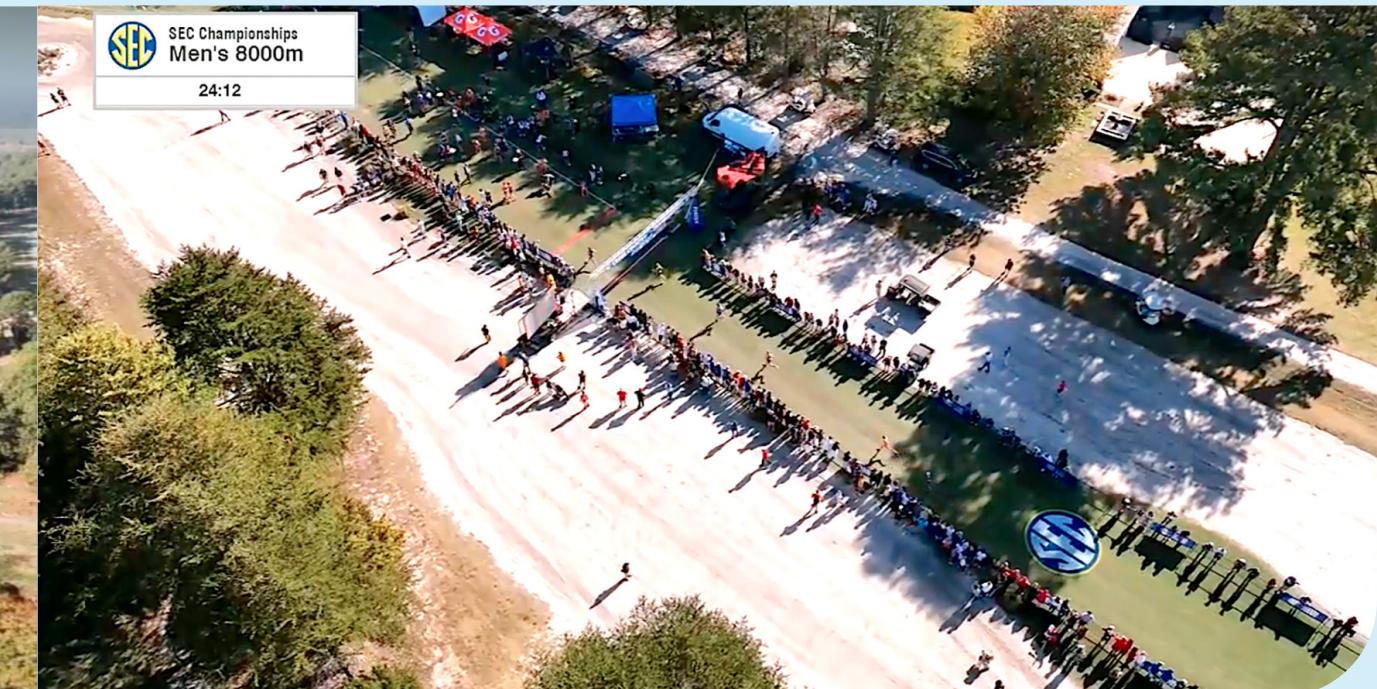
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# ROCK LUCAS, CHARWOOD GOLF CLUB RUNNING WITH THE BIG DOGS

By Scott Kauffman



**L**ike most peers in the business, Charwood Golf Club owner Rock Lucas, whose family-owned course in West Columbia, S.C. is now in its third generation of management, knows a thing or two about running golf championships. But Lucas, whose late father started building their 18-hole course in the late 1960s, now has the distinction of hosting championships for runners.

And these weren't just any running events, which courses have done for decades with an occasional 5k or local high school tournament. Last October, Charwood played host to the 2023 Southeastern Conference Cross Country Championships that was nationally televised on the SEC Network.

In some respects, you can say Rock and his son Daniel are now running with the big dogs. And that's saying a lot considering Rock is a longtime NGCOA officer with rare PGA/CGCS status, while his son is the president of the South Carolina Golf Course Owners Association and newly minted Class-A superintendent.

For the Lucas Family, whose course is just eight miles outside the state capital of Columbia and home to the University of South Carolina, Charwood is no stranger to having regular visitors, patrons and members over the years with ties to the SEC. In fact, the Lucas Family, like many in the surrounding Midlands area, are ardent supporters of the Gamecocks and "huge Gamecock Club boosters for 62 consecutive years," Rock Lucas proudly says.



“The exposure for the golf course, you couldn’t buy that, who ended up getting paid the equivalent of three day’s worth of tee times. To get that coast to coast coverage on national TV is priceless ... So it was good exposure for sure.”

— Rock Lucas

But for the unique three-day affair his club and community just pulled off in front of an estimated 2,000-plus live spectators and many more watching via the broadcast, this was a ‘golf’ course event for the ages. And Rock Lucas says his SEC cross country event was nothing like it used to be when participants “ran through forest, jumped over logs and dead trees and ran through creeks and streams.”

At Charwood, the SEC’s respective 6-to-8 mile men’s and women’s layouts, which started on the 18th tee and cut across several fairways, open fields and practice areas before finishing on the first hole, had to be delivered in what amounted to be “almost perfect.” For instance, Lucas’ staff had to cut any random roots that happened to be in the path of runners and a double drum asphalt roller was brought on property because SEC officials wanted every “little undulation in the turf to be filled in.”

Ironically, Charwood maintained golf-like conditions for a cross country event.

“We rolled the entire track so they wanted it almost immaculate,” Rock Lucas says. “We had irrigation heads filled over and had to come back and vacuum them all out after the meet. ... They wanted it almost perfect like an indoor track.”

But it was worth every minute – adds Lucas – whose staff, members and community took great pride in the exciting event as SEC buses rolled in and exclusively parked on site as if it were College GameDay coming to town for a big-time SEC football game. Lucas wouldn’t disclose what the SEC paid to rent the facility, but what initially started out in being just two half-days of shutting down for the event wound up being three full days of being closed to the golfing public.

“The exposure for the golf course, you couldn’t buy that,” adds Lucas, who ended up getting paid the equivalent of three day’s worth of tee times. “To get that coast to coast coverage on national TV is priceless ... So it was good exposure for sure.”

“Everyone took a lot of pride in it. Our members and staff took pride in being able to host it. And getting the track ready was something the team took a lot of pride in. And it was really good for the community.”

The only bummer for the locals was the fact South Carolina didn’t win it all. But Rock Lucas did proudly point out a Gamecock girl set the course record after recording it during the soft practice meet held prior to the championship run.

So in the end the USC cross country team will forever be champions in the hearts and minds of Rock Lucas and the greater Charwood Golf Club family. ■

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# CLUB CADDIE FOUNDER AND CEO PEARSALL PRESERVES HISTORIC COURSE, FATHERLY TIES

By Scott Kauffman

**D**uring a Dearborn Heights, Mich., city council meeting last October, after nearly 5 hours of serious and sometimes contentious public discussion ranging from policing to politics and other civic matters, course operator Jason Pearsall walked to the podium and introduced himself as the “golf guy” with the privilege of now running the city’s Warren Valley Golf Course.

He was the final public speaker that night, and as Pearsall put it, he didn’t come to the council meeting to talk about the much-improved course drainage and how the Detroit-area facility used to “shut down for three days every time it rained and now we’re open the next day.” And he wasn’t there to discuss how his team got the greens “rolling at 11” and the “top USGA sand being used” at the historic Donald Ross-designed layout that reopened in April after being closed for more than a year.

“I had a nice meeting with Councilman Abdel-Hak,” Pearsall went on to say, “and he helped me to realize only 1 in 7 people use that golf course and while there may be 10,000 golfers, there’s still a community. So, I wanted to talk about the community and how it benefits from the golf course. Things we currently do ... as far as the community impact.”

Pearsall emphasized these weren’t things he promised to change or implement, but golf initiatives his team already started since signing a long-term lease with the city and taking over the former 36-hole property that suffered years of neglect under previous third-party management.

Pearsall went on to describe the welcome mat extended to numerous area high schools, for example, including free memberships for both boys and girls. He cited Warren Valley’s relationship with First Tee of Greater Detroit and season-long junior camps they’re conducting, exposing the game and valuable life skills to a future generation that might not have had access otherwise.





And for families that perhaps can't afford to send kids to camp, or seniors that can't afford to play, don't worry, he told the council he has free clinics for kids, free access to the practice facility (open to the public), and a special \$5 rate for senior citizens. On several occasions, council members applauded Pearsall's presentation and praised the efforts of their new course operator.

Indeed, like everything the soft-spoken Pearsall is known to do, whether it's being a successful golf technology entrepreneur or serial course owner/operator, what's paramount to Pearsall isn't making a profit or always having a 'what's best for me' attitude.

To Pearsall, embracing an enlightened approach to business, and life, for that matter, is what truly inspires and motivates this Michigan native. So, when it comes down to Warren Valley, Pearsall is forever mindful of what's best for the greater community, or even the greater golf industry, an approach Pearsall consistently applies in his other golf role as founder and CEO of management software company Club Caddie.

For instance, under the leadership of Pearsall, Club Caddie is an avid sponsor at numerous national golf conferences and trade shows, and one of the more com-

elling aspects of the company is its customer-centric "Software for Life Policy," a long-term commitment to continually enhance and develop product upgrades that best suit the future technology needs of each client's facility – free of charge.

Admittedly, Pearsall will tell what Warren Valley is doing for Dearborn Heights is nothing unique from a golf operator's perspective. Nevertheless, the industry's philanthropic nature is something that needs to be told more frequently, he adds.

"This impact is a story we need to share," Pearsall adds. "I just read an article in Yahoo and it's trying to glorify that golf courses are closing and how nature is reclaiming green space and how great this is for communities. I think we need to be doing the opposite. We need to be saying how good golf courses are for communities because we just don't do a good enough job highlighting that."

"There's going to be a changing of the city council and I don't know if they're going to be supportive of the golf course or not, so I wanted to get ahead of that."

To be sure, there is a personal agenda associated with running Wayne Valley, or Pearsall's previous course ownership ties to another Michigan facility, Flushing Valley.

Growing up in golf-rich Michigan, Pearsall was passionate about the sport and he can credit his father, a former country club manager, for sparking that passion. But it wasn't through the most traditional father-son way.

"My parents divorced when I was young and my father moved two hours away, so I saw him during the summer times," Pearsall says. "I fell in love with golf. The only time I would see him was when I went to work with him. I worked at the course. ... you know the grunt jobs. But those were my best summers."

For the other nine months of the year, however, Pearsall was back home with his single mother and frankly "couldn't afford to play golf."

"I didn't have access to golf," Pearsall says. "It wasn't accessible to me. I guess the only reason I had access to golf was because my father was in the business. Not because we could really afford it. With my mother, we just couldn't afford it."

Pearsall never forgot those painful personal memories of not being able to play a game he loved. And consequently, tries affecting the lives of others as much as possible at Warren Valley.

There's one other personal twist to the unexpected timing of jumping back into the course ownership business. Pearsall is reunited with his father, John Pearsall, spending more valuable time together back working on a golf course.

"My father worked for me at Flushing Valley, and he works for me now at Warren Valley," Pearsall says with a glint of happiness. "He's currently battling cancer and honestly doesn't have a lot of time left. So this opportunity to do this together with him at Warren Valley has been a really special experience."

Ultimately that might be the greatest impact golf can ever leave for someone. **TB**

OCTOBER 2023

# Uh Oh: It's Cart Path Only! Here We Go...

By **Dave Barton**, Executive Director, National Alliance for Accessible Golf

The sun has just risen, the tee sheet is full, the staff is ready, and the course access policy for the day has arrived ... "We are **Cart Path Only** today."

The words "Cart Path Only" (CPO) can invoke a range of emotions from frustration or anger to fear depending on whether you are the golfer or the staff handling the phones and counter on this morning. Those of you who have worked as a professional or shop assistant at the counter know what I am talking about.

To start, let's breakdown "the golfers" and what drives some to question the policy on any given day and how your policies and staff training are critical to customer satisfaction. In terms of golfers that consider CPO a "dirty word", an acronym in this case, there are a few groups to consider:

- Golfers who just like to ride in a cart, rarely if ever walk, but have no disabilities that would prevent them from enjoying the round of golf with a few extra steps between the path and their ball,
- Golfers who require access to the fairways, or closer to tees and greens because of a disability, or might just be of an age without a disability where the occasional courtesy of better access gives them a few more swings and rounds on the course, and
- Seated golfers who require adaptive golf cars on all areas of the course including tees and greens to access and play the game as would any golfer.

So, how do you create and communicate policies to ensure these groups, all with different reasons for not subscribing to the CPO Fan Club, better understand why, in some situations, play for them may be more restricted, or even impossible?

How do you work to maintain mutually positive customer service experiences for both the customer and the club in situations where course access will likely keep some golfers from playing that day?

Well, for starters the golf club usually needs to communicate better. But, in fairness, golfers must also work to appreciate the challenges of maintaining a golf course as well as the course requirement to provide a safe environment to play.

We'll talk about the importance of consistency in the application of policies but first, both the course superintendent and professional staff must understand and be in sync with what the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (the ADA) and subsequent ADA guidance has established as law.

The ADA is a large government document with plenty of language that at times, although black and white, can seem like an overwhelming amount of information. Simply put and distilled down to the most critical element, the ADA "...requires state and local governments, businesses and non-profit organizations to provide goods, services and programs to people with disabilities on an equal basis with the rest of the public." [1]

Equal basis is the key to ensuring your course policies and the application of them place your golf course in a position that consistently demonstrates you are providing access to your goods and services (the golf course) in an equitable manner to all individuals. If you are being equitable in the application of your policies, then an unreasonable denial of access for any group of golfers is unlikely.

A golf course operator is absolutely permitted to protect the golf course from damage and restrict ALL play to CPO

if previous, or current weather conditions are of a nature that golf cars, including adaptive golf cars would cause damage to the course if allowed off the path. Weather may also simply present a safety issue for the golfer when slopes around the golf course necessitate CPO from a personal risk management standpoint until conditions are safer. These would be considered a reasonable application of CPO.

Additionally, if course maintenance, such as chemical applications have occurred and golf car traffic will alter the effectiveness of those applications or present a safety issue of any kind to the golfers, CPO for all golfers would be considered reasonable.

Hopefully, the recurring message you are beginning to see is the importance of providing access off the path to all golfers whenever possible, but ensuring when you cannot, you have justifiable and reasonable reasons not to.

To be clear, there is obviously nothing wrong with being CPO, but a good general rule of thumb under "normal playing conditions" versus the situations outlined above is you should not be denying course access to golfers identified above that require more access (groups 2 and 3). In these cases, you would be providing equitable access to your goods and services for individuals to play the game who would not have it if restricted to the path.

A good standard for normal playing conditions could include criteria that if course maintenance such as mowing tees, fairways, and greens is permitted, access for golfers who have a legitimate requirement for additional levels off the path to play the game is warranted. That said, there are certainly times when the grass just must be cut in less-than-ideal situations that would not be considered "normal conditions". In these situations, it would still be reasonable for the course to limit non-maintenance related vehicles off the path from a potential damage or safety perspective. The best advice when in these scenarios is do not be afraid to over communicate to your customers what is going on.

The National Alliance for Accessible Golf provides a Golf Course Accessibility Template in our Resources section via our free networking and information forum, the **Golf Access and Inclusion Network™ (GAIN)**. This downloadable word document can be modified to your facilities policies and is a great step towards better communications with your customers. Beyond a solid and publicly available Accessibility Statement on your website, we recommend you consider the following to further develop a welcoming and inclusive environment.

Visit [accessiBe](#) and use their AI to convert your existing website quickly and affordably into an accessible website that meets ADA standards and the Web Content

Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). We use accessiBe and can stand by its ease and functionality.

Consider some signage in your pro shop that encourages golfers to call ahead if they would like to know the cart path policy that is in place.

Use your email and text lists to share the day's policy if access may be limited, such as CPO and encourage all your customers to subscribe to your email and text notifications, especially those that may be in front of you and not pleased they drove an hour to play and have good reasons for requiring better access.

Consider green **ACCESS FLAGS** versus blue handicapped flags. Although the word handicapped is still used, it has become less favorable as a term to people with disabilities. Green says GO and ACCESS sends a message to your customers and community that your golf club is looking for every opportunity possible to get all your customers on the course.

As a PGA Golf Professional and former operator, I can safely say I was not as informed as I could have been on many of the things outlined above when I was working the counter and leading properties. I should have been and that is 100% on me. The ADA was enacted in 1990, not 2023.

Set clear policies and train your staff at all levels. As importantly, make sure your customers know your policies and have a belief that even though your course will have restrictions now and then, these same customers will know that you strive daily to provide equitable access to all.

We invite you to Join Our Community on GAIN and ask any questions you may have about the above and better yet, with your advice and experience, help answer questions like this or other matters related to access and inclusion in the game of golf.

GAIN is a place for all – golfers and those looking to learn, family or friends seeking information, instructional programs hosted by golf and therapeutic facilities, coaches, organizations that now support these efforts and those who may be interested in supporting, and more.

The health and wellness benefits of golf to all who choose to play are indisputable and our mission is to seek ways to increase the participation of people with disabilities in the game of golf.

Advocating for access is job one for the National Alliance. Access leads to inclusion and a better-connected community inside and outside of the club property lines.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ada.gov>

## 2023-2024 GOLF INDUSTRY EVENT CALENDAR

[ngcoa.org/events](http://ngcoa.org/events)

All events and dates are subject to change. Please visit event websites listed at [ngcoa.org/events](http://ngcoa.org/events) for updated information.

### NOVEMBER 27 - NOVEMBER 29, 2023 MICHIGAN GOLF BUSINESS CONFERENCE & VENDOR FAIR

Battle Creek, MI

### DECEMBER 4 - 5, 2023 NEW ENGLAND GOLF COURSE OWNERS ASSOCIATION WORKSHOP AND ANNUAL MEETING & CONFERENCE

Haverhill, MA

### JANUARY 22 - JANUARY 24, 2024 GOLF BUSINESS CONFERENCE 2024

Orlando, FL

### JANUARY 24 - JANUARY 26, 2024 2024 PGA SHOW

Orlando, FL

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