

The 18th fairway at Rush Creek Golf Club in Maple Grove. Great weather and high demand equaled a booming economy for the business in 2020. (Photo courtesy of Rush Creek Golf Club)

AT RIGHT: A threesome putts on the green at Edinburgh USA in Brooklyn Park. Last year, the golf course had record revenue even though they opened three weeks late due to the pandemic and had 10 days closed in October due to snow. (Photo courtesy of Don Berry)



Local golf courses get boost from pandemic

First in an ongoing series that will take

an in-depth look at the pandemic

and its affect on our community.

While many businesses took a hit due to COVID-19, golf courses saw a rise in popularity and revenue, hope to see it continue in 2021

By **SAM JOHNSON**

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Last summer, when the majority of recreational centers were on Course is \$25 and includes shut down because of the pandemic, outdoor places one could to be with others became even more sought after, and rarer still were athletic competitions since a safe social distance, being outdoors, and competing athletically: golf.

In Minnesota, the changing of seasons breeds a feeling of renewal, a fresh start. There is no better analogy of that than the melting of snow and the resurrection of green grass and warm sunshine. With those higher temperatures and firmer grounds comes a reality many Ryan said they have seen roughin the state anxiously await each spring: the return to golf.

For those that play often, the age-old pastime has always been adults they saw last summer, he a popular activity that combines friendly competition with aerobic exercise with good camara-

the association advertised their Youth on Course initiative, which gives kids ages six to 18 the opportunity to play golf for \$5 or less at select courses. An annual membership for Youth a junior membership to the association. Last year, over 11,500 kids signed up, almost tripling the amount in 2019.

"Golf was one of the few many sports require close con-sports or activities that all Mintact. One recreational activity fit nesotans could safely particithe thin Venn diagram of having pate in throughout the summer," MGA Executive Director and COO Tom Ryan said. "Playing golf checked all the boxes and met each and every social distancing protocol. It was outdoors, it was both a physically and mentally healthful activity, and it gave thousands of kids and their families something to do together."

So far this season, Warren ly 8,500 kids register. While he doesn't expect to reach the same attendance heights of kids and is encouraged by the number of golfers that are coming back to restrictions on in-person dincontinue playing the sport.

We're hearing leagues at quickly," Warren Ryan said. a patio and take-out, which alsaw last year, it would be a great they dealt with a bigger financial

Don Berry is the director of golf and head PGA professional bounce back, this season brings at Edinburgh USA in Brooklyn Park. He said last year they had "Rounds exploded due to CO- record revenue at the course, VID because golf was one of the even though they opened three taurant and banquet facilities few things people could do to go weeks late due to the pandemic can see improved business with out and get exercise," Minnesota and had 10 days closed in Oc- restrictions removed.. Golf Association communica- tober due to snow. While he is tions director Warren Ryan said. not sure whether or not they will

young people out on the links, is encouraged by the rise he has seen in the popularity of the sport during the past 12 months. "Golf is still hot," he said.

It also helps that the unpredictable Minnesota weather has allowed them an earlier start date this spring, instead of the 6 inches of snow on the ground last Easter. "We feel we're ahead of the game," Derek Stendahl, general manager of Rush Creek Golf Club in Maple Grove, said.

MORE THAN JUST GOLF

On the links, attendance has skyrocketed over the past year, but what about golf courses with more to do than drive, chip, and putt?

At Rush Creek, along with having a full 18-hole and par 3 course, Stendahl is in charge of the restaurant and banquet area of the facility. If golf's revenue would be labeled as outstanding, he said the restaurant's was OK and the banquet side of the business has been horrible.

Great weather and high demand equaled a booming economy for the golf business at Rush Creek, but with tighter ing, the food and entertainment business took a hit. Their res-"We're optimistic and realistic. I lowed for more outdoor dining loss.

> Now with the potential to new hope and optimism that with golf being just as popular as last year, Rusk Creek's res-

TIPS FOR THE NEWBIES For those who are new to the

The scenic 3rd hole at Baker National Golf Course in Medina.

(Photo by Jeff May) to start with lessons or with the Par 3 course and to not shy away from getting experience. "PGA professionals are excited to get said. "Don't be intimidated be-

cause you haven't played."

It may be just a game for novices, but Stendahl says golf serves as an important getaway for people, now more than ever.

'We want to take the approach that golf can be used to forget about the other stuff in life, have fun, be away and decompress, more so now than at any other time in our lives," he said. "We just want to be an avenue for people to enjoy that."

Jeff May is the head of golf operations at Baker National Golf Club in Medina. He also who are new to golf to improve flows with patrons. is to take lessons, something The winter break didn't seem might lessen slightly. to dampen the desire of novice record registrations in March for summer lessons. "The best working with a great instructor," May said.

'A GAME FOR A LIFETIME' As someone who played golf said. in high school and college, May knows how important golf is in

game, Stendahl encourages them society. It combines outdoor exercise, with lifelong friendships and near-impossible mastery. "I do it for relaxation, exercise and competition, as well as improvnew golfers into the game," he ing mental health," he said. Last year it was only magnified, with baseball, basketball, and other common sports being restricted due to the pandemic.

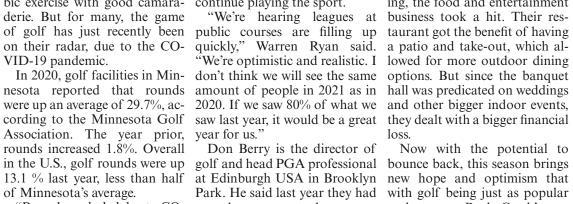
"It's always time to start golf ... it is a game for a lifetime," Berry said. "Most people can play their whole lives; try playing hockey, football, baseball or basketball at age 75, most people can't even play those at 40, but you can golf in most cases late in life.'

A sunny Saturday in the Minnesota summer is treasured and at golf courses, when one comes around, each hole is always ocbelieves the best way for those cupied and the clubhouse over-

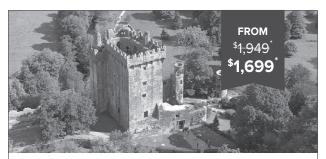
In 2020, May felt like every that has been in high demand day was a Saturday or Sunday. since last summer. Baker Na- Now a year later, he thinks tional even had to increase the that the popularity of the sport number of instructors to lower hasn't changed, but with more the ratio of students to teachers. people back to work, the crowds

"I don't think it could be as golfers to learn, as Baker had busy as last year," May said. "I don't think that's sustainable. I think it'll be between an avway to learn the fundamentals is erage year and last year. After the sport's 2020 center-stage appearance, golf is not ready to stop growing.

"It is the greatest game," May







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