



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

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

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Last summer, when the majority of recreational centers were shut down because of the pandemic, outdoor places one could be with others became even more sought after, and rarer still were athletic competitions since many sports require close contact. One recreational activity fit the thin Venn diagram of having 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 in the state anxiously await each spring: the return to golf.

For those that play often, the age-old pastime has always been a popular activity that combines friendly competition with aerobic exercise with good camaraderie. But for many, the game of golf has just recently been on their radar, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020, golf facilities in Minnesota reported that rounds were up an average of 29.7%, according to the Minnesota Golf Association. The year prior, rounds increased 1.8%. Overall in the U.S., golf rounds were up 13.1% last year, less than half of Minnesota's average.

"Rounds exploded due to COVID because golf was one of the few things people could do to go out and get exercise," Minnesota Golf Association communications director Warren Ryan said.

In an attempt to get more



First in an ongoing series that will take an in-depth look at the pandemic and its affect on our community.

young people out on the links, 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 on Course is \$25 and includes 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 sports or activities that all Minnesotans could safely participate 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 Ryan said they have seen roughly 8,500 kids register. While he doesn't expect to reach the same attendance heights of kids and adults they saw last summer, he is encouraged by the number of golfers that are coming back to continue playing the sport.

"We're hearing leagues at public courses are filling up quickly," Warren Ryan said. "We're optimistic and realistic. I don't think we will see the same amount of people in 2021 as in 2020. If we saw 80% of what we saw last year, it would be a great year for us."

Don Berry is the director of golf and head PGA professional at Edinburgh USA in Brooklyn Park. He said last year they had record revenue at the course, even though they opened three weeks late due to the pandemic and had 10 days closed in October due to snow. While he is not sure whether or not they will meet last year's numbers, Berry

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 restrictions on in-person dining, the food and entertainment business took a hit. Their restaurant got the benefit of having a patio and take-out, which allowed for more outdoor dining options. But since the banquet hall was predicated on weddings and other bigger indoor events, they dealt with a bigger financial loss.

Now with the potential to bounce back, this season brings new hope and optimism that with golf being just as popular as last year, Rush Creek's restaurant and banquet facilities can see improved business with restrictions removed.

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)

game, Stendahl encourages them to start with lessons or with the Par 3 course and to not shy away from getting experience. "PGA professionals are excited to get new golfers into the game," he said. "Don't be intimidated because 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 believes the best way for those who are new to golf to improve is to take lessons, something that has been in high demand since last summer. Baker National even had to increase the number of instructors to lower the ratio of students to teachers. The winter break didn't seem to dampen the desire of novice golfers to learn, as Baker had record registrations in March for summer lessons. "The best way to learn the fundamentals is working with a great instructor," May said.

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

society. It combines outdoor exercise, with lifelong friendships and near-impossible mastery. "I do it for relaxation, exercise and competition, as well as improving 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 occupied and the clubhouse overflows with patrons.

In 2020, May felt like every day was a Saturday or Sunday. Now a year later, he thinks that the popularity of the sport hasn't changed, but with more people back to work, the crowds might lessen slightly.

"I don't think it could be as busy as last year," May said. "I don't think that's sustainable. I think it'll be between an average 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 said.

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