

State's golf industry poised for bright future

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Despite a pandemic that continues to plague the economy, Wisconsin's golf industry is poised for a bright future after the summer brought a big jump in rounds played.

This summer, golf has seen a resurgence nationwide after having a stable participation base for the past six years, according to the National Golf Foundation. Rounds of golf have been up year-over-year in every state in the continental U.S. for the past three months. For 2020, the total number of Wisconsin rounds were up almost 13 percent entering September, outpacing the national average, which is currently up 6.2 percent on the year.

In Wisconsin, play has rebounded significantly since courses were permitted to reopen in late April, according to Erik Matuszewski, editorial director of the National Golf Foundation.

In April, rounds were down more than 48 percent compared to April 2019. But they've increased a lot the past four months. May saw an increase of 17 percent year-over-year, June had a 13.5 percent increase, July's rounds increased by 12.4 percent, and August saw an increase of 23.4 percent over the same time last year.

Jeremy Cabalka, general manager of municipal-owned Pleasant View Golf Course in Middleton said the course has certainly noticed the increase in rounds played — “no question about that.”

“Golf is, I would argue, almost the definition of social distancing,” Cabalka said. “You don’t have to touch anybody else’s equipment, you don’t have to touch the flag sticks, you don’t have to touch really anything but your own property.”

He added that playing golf has not only been a safe activity to avoid COVID-19, but it’s also a positive force for mental and physical well-being.

“I burn anywhere between 500 and 700 calories just walking nine holes of golf. I think 18 holes for me is right around 1,500 calories that I burn just playing golf,” Cavalla said. “It is so good for you from a mental and physical standpoint. I think people are seeing the benefits of golf from a health perspective.”

Both Cabalka and Rob Jansen, executive director of the Wisconsin State Golf Association, agree that golf participation has jumped for health reasons. But another key to golf’s success has been cabin fever — a side effect of staying home in order to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus.

After all, with some activities deemed as too high a risk for viral transmission, and taverns, gyms and entertainment venues having to shut down or reduce capacity per government order, options to get out of the house are limited.

“Golf is one of the few things that they can go out and do,” Cabalka said. “We’re open. It kind of enables people to make the decision to go play golf because they’re limited in what else they can do.”

Jansen said people have seen golf as “something fun to try,” which has brought new players to the game.

Families especially have taken to golf, according to Cabalka. He added that Pleasant View's par-3 golf course, one of the course's four, nine-hole courses, has been a popular family venture.

"It gives families something to do to get out of the house and frankly be very, very safe," he said.

And golf courses have worked to make the game — and the course — even safer.

Golf outings and events, such as weddings, have had to be cancelled. Courses have moved retail and tee-time scheduling online or outside. And some have stopped food and beverage service or moved it to an outdoor setting.

"I think the industry as a whole has gotten really creative to still provide a great service and do it safely," Jansen said. "Some of the decrease in certain areas of revenue have been offset by large, in some cases really large, increases in rounds played, and revenue from golf operations have been able to offset losses in other areas."

Cabalka said due to the volume of people who come to Pleasant View, the course "took a different stance than most golf courses."

Pleasant View only allows outdoor check-in and it has completely eliminated indoor seating.

"That was our choice to do our part to try to keep people safe," Cabalka said. "We just felt it was right for our business."

Pleasant View's food and beverage sales are down this year compared to last due to the changes, with a large part because of no group golf outings. Meanwhile, club sales and rentals have been flat. The increase in rounds, though, has made up for the losses, Cabalka said.

Meanwhile, he expects Pleasant View to have a relatively busy fall, "especially if the sun is out and the wind is down."

The course stays open as weather permits. On average, Cabalka said Pleasant View has been open until mid-November, sometimes opening for a few days in December. As of when Pleasant View will open up inside, he said he doesn't have that answer right now.

The silver lining for the industry during the pandemic has been people realizing the benefits of golf, he continued.

"I do hope that these trends continue for at least next year and beyond," Cabalka concluded. "It's neat to see all the beginners that are picking up the game. It's very inspiring I would say from an operating standpoint."

Even as the effects of COVID-19 are eventually minimized through vaccines, therapeutics and advances in medicine, "golf is extremely well-positioned moving forward," Jansen said.

"I think people are going to continue to be attracted to the game of golf for all of its great benefits and how safe it is," he said. "I'm really optimistic about the outlook for golf as we head to the future here and very thankful that it's an outdoor, safe game that can be enjoyed by men, women, children, really everybody. We're excited to see what the future holds."



-By Stephanie Hoff

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