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Ready, Willing & Able

By David Gould

Making golf more accessible for the physically disabled can pay dividends while serving a greater good

A glance at national participation trends—and, in all likelihood, the rounds-played numbers at your course—shows that golf is in need of bodies. And it's becoming increasingly clear that they don't all have to be "able" bodies. Golf facility managers who consistently and actively reach out to the 51 million people with disabilities living in the United States are realizing the humanitarian and business benefits of doing so.



"There's a business to be had in providing golf to the disabled," insists John Valliere, general manager of Braemar Golf Course in Edina, Minnesota, and a consultant to public golf facilities. Valliere cites his every-Monday tournament outing for the physically challenged as a clear example.

"Our Monday group runs 15 weeks a year, and we do 100-plus players every time," he says. "They're comped on cart rental, but otherwise they pay no differently than able-bodied players."

According to Valliere, this initiative yields a revenue stream that is, at a minimum, equal to 1,500 times the standard rate of \$13 charged to play the facility's executive course. He's quick to point out, however, the ancillary income generated by this hearty group, many of whom return to the course to play on their own at other times.

"They take lessons, they eat in our grill room and they buy merchandise," says Valliere, whose base of approximately \$20,000 in Monday fees extrapolates upward to about double that amount in annual revenue for these customers.

Farther west, Haggin Oaks Golf Course in Sacramento, California, actually employs a staff member, Brian Rooney, to spearhead the club's programs for juniors and golfers with disabilities. Like Braemar's contingent in Minnesota, Rooney's complement of players with disabilities numbers approximately 100.

"They're golfers just like anybody else," Rooney says. "When they go out to play, they pay a green fee. We provide some instruction at no charge, and the ones that need to use our adaptive carts pay to rent it, but they don't pay anything on top of that. Otherwise, anything that regular golfers would pay for, they pay for."

Any course operator who caters to people with disabilities in a significant way will almost certainly wind up working with one of the many organizations and foundations that serve this community. These agencies—public and private—offer event coordination as well as helpful advice on how to make the disabled a viable part of business. One such group is the industry-grown National Alliance for

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Accessible Golf, an organization founded in 2001 on the premise that America's vast numbers of physically challenged could greatly benefit from golf activity.

The alliance's GAIN initiative (the acronym stands for Golf: Accessible and Inclusive Networks) allows groups for the disabled to set up ongoing, supported participation programs at individual golf facilities. Currently, there are six permanent GAIN programs in the U.S., spreading from Delaware to Mississippi to Utah. Several years ago, the GAIN program in Toledo, Ohio, extended itself to five area communities, each managed by a partnership between a local organization and a staff member at each course.

As part of its efforts, the National Alliance for Accessible Golf educates course and range owners about the significant assets that back up individuals with disabilities who seek recreational activity. For starters, there's the pool of dollars represented by government disability checks that, when you provide recreation for the disabled, you're tapping legitimately into. What's more, charitable institutions are able to subsidize their clients as well.

That's why Susan Hagel, therapeutic director for the Minnesota-based Sister Kenny Institute, told Valliere long ago to set reasonable rates for golfers with disabilities and not think twice about charging them.

"These people are capable of paying," Valliere says. "Some of them are quite well off. Course owners need to understand how much value is placed on disabled recreation—especially outdoor recreation and particularly in the golf setting, where they can enjoy camaraderie and build friendships."

Across the board, golf operators with a clientele of players with disabilities agree: If being at the golf course makes able-bodied people feel special, it makes those who have lost physical capacities feel that much more so.

Steve Jubb, who directs PGA Charities (part of the PGA of America Foundation) and is a National Alliance for Accessible Golf board member, offers up the relationship between PGA Golf Club in Port St. Lucie, Florida, and the Visiting Nurses Association (VNA) as a prime example of local institutions helping the golf operator.

"Once a month, the VNA holds a seminar for disabled clients, usually with a light dinner, where they provide information and updates," says Jubb, noting that the majority of these events are conducted at restaurants or in a hospital conference room. When the seminars are staged at PGA Golf Club, however, attendees receive golf instruction and meet afterwards in the grill.

"The caregiver is there, the disabled person is there, [and] the day becomes a real highlight," Jubb says. "The next thing they're saying is, 'Let's go back.'"

Along with the National Alliance for Accessible Golf, entities like the USGA pitch in to connect the disabled with their local course. In 2009, the USGA Grants Initiative dispensed \$1.35 million to worthy causes, one-fifth of which were all about making golf accessible to players with disabilities.

Of all sub-groups within the disabled population, amputees are perhaps best-known for their golf zeal. The National Amputee Golf Association (NAGA), now in its 45th year, partners with the USGA, the PGA of America and the Disabled American Veterans Charitable Trust to support the activities of some 2,500 members worldwide, primarily through its First Swing and Learn to Golf initiatives. For decades, NAGA tournaments have provided many a course owner or instructor with an introduction to golf as played by those with physical limitations.

A prime reason why golf access for disabled persons has to make business sense is so managers and teaching professionals can get past the feel-good stage, which by nature is temporary. "It's not that helping the physically and mentally challenged doesn't continue to be especially rewarding," says Mike Harbour, a golf professional from Cranston, Rhode Island. "It's just that any ongoing program needs to sustain itself and not become stagnant."

Harbour speaks from experience. As a director of First Swing Rhode Island, he witnessed how a golf access program for the physically challenged went from what was, in his view, a successful venture to one that stalled out because it wasn't treated as a business.

"First Swing Rhode Island was a phenomenal success," says Harbour, the former golf coach at Brown University. "We were growing quickly. We had very good revenue. Our first year, we had 100 participants, then it dropped off to around 40."

Harbour believes that the program had the potential to "help every disabled person in the state," but he insists the organization had a committee that "couldn't accept that vision. They didn't want to grow it." From his base at a golf range/entertainment center called Mulligan's Island, Harbour is now attempting to revive the organization and build its client base aggressively.

Golf facility operators have long been hesitant to open up to victims of physical disability. Damage to greens from wheeled devices, slow play and excess demand on staff members' time have been perennial concerns. There's a learning curve for course owners to travel, no doubt.

Be that as it may, enough operators have gained experience and adapted to this market that a set of reliable best practices is emerging. At the same time, recreation directors at the various agencies have also learned the ropes. Meanwhile, the codes and requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (though resented at times by builders and their clients) have done the work of preparing most golf facilities for the basic needs of players with disabilities. (For more information and to access an ADA tool kit, visit www.accessgolf.org.)

True, the ADA statutes extend beyond building codes to require a certain level of service and treatment of disabled persons who are patronizing your business. But Jubb contends that golf managers shouldn't expect problems in fulfilling them.

"Under ADA, you have to provide what's called 'reasonable accommodation,'" he says. "The Department of Justice has tried to get public input from all sides about this. It's still a matter of interpretation."

Though he's not in a position to provide legal advice, Jubb argues that "a little forethought and common sense" are the main tools that operators need to reach ADA compliance. "[For example], when you've had heavy rains and the slopes around greens are slick or a little muddy, you shouldn't have the single-rider carts on those areas."

Legal issues aside, much of the current momentum behind golf for the disabled stems from battlefield injuries suffered in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Roadside explosions and suicide bombings produce amputations, brain injuries and other disabling conditions at a relatively high rate, compared to what's been suffered in prior combat. Also, the psychological toll of multiple deployments yields a considerable amount of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is also a disability eligible for funded rehab.

According to Betsy Clark, the "Wounded Warrior factor" (as in the Wounded Warrior Project, the nonprofit organization that seeks to provide "unique, direct programs and services to meet the needs of severely injured service members") is helping drive new initiatives.

"People are looking at our industry and saying, 'Hey, golf is excellent rehab for these deserving people,'" says Clark, former vice president of professional development for the LPGA and now an independent consultant on this topic. "And when they experience it, they're truly excited. Who wouldn't rather play golf than throw a medicine ball around a rehab room?"

The message is simple: If dedicated patrons are important to your business, reach out to recovering American veterans. "The dedication of some of these injured service people is hard to believe," says Bob Dougherty, a professional who teaches at two courses in Southern Pines, North Carolina, and has conducted golf schools exclusively for Wounded Warriors.

To illustrate his point, Dougherty shares the story of one soldier with whom he worked who had a rod

up his spine and shrapnel wounds in his shoulder and leg. "It was 95 degrees and he wanted to stay on the range all day, Dougherty says. "After a while, he was bleeding from his shoulder and out of his leg. He told me, 'I can't be back tomorrow, I have to get some shrapnel out, but I'll be back the day after.'"

For San Antonio, Texas-based teacher and clubfitter Gary Pickle, the Scottish Rite Hospital for Children provides an early source of golfers with physical challenges. He stepped forward years ago when the hospital was seeking golf professionals to take on recovering orthopedic patients. After some initial frustration, Pickle became so intrigued with his special cases that today half his time (though not quite half his income) is devoted to teaching and fitting golfers with disabilities.

"Any professional who enjoys teaching will be able to help disabled golfers," Pickle says. "In the process, he'll become a better teacher because this kind of student requires you to take in the whole person, not just their golf technique. Then, you start taking that approach to your able-bodied students as well, which only helps you teach them."

Achieving success with stroke victims and amputee golfers also works to expand Pickle's supply of students without disabilities. "Word gets around," he says. "It's a win-win situation. They're appreciative, so they help promote me and my business."

As the National Alliance for Accessible Golf points out, disabilities of one kind or another afflict one in every five Americans. The organization has also found that only 10 percent of persons with some form of limitation now play golf, and 35 percent of those who are disabled and don't currently play are interested in learning how. With such a potentially large pool of customers, look for a growing number of course owners and operators to develop new programming for golfers with disabilities while introducing products and techniques that make the process more manageable and, in turn, more business-like.

David Gould is a Connecticut-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to Golf Business.

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