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COMPETITION HEATS UP AMONG UTAH GOLF COURSES

By Suzanne Kimball

It's likely that at this very moment, a golfer is teeing off somewhere in Utah, hoping for a hookless long drive across 400 yards of emerald-colored living carpet. As his club strikes the ball, he can almost hear the air around him slice in half. His opponents watch for the angle that will either take the ball onto the green or land it in some trees. They hope for the trees. And why wouldn't they? After all, this is a competition, one that Utahns take seriously through more than 90,000 rounds of golf per year in Salt Lake County alone.

But on-course rivalry isn't the only competitive aspect of golf. Among the state's 102 (and counting) golf courses, competition for the attention of Utah players is heating up. That's because the number of golf courses in the state has been increasing by more than one per year since 1993.

"National statistics show that Utah is ranked fifth in the nation for number of courses per player," notes Steve Elliott, vice president of the Utah Professional Golf Association (PGA) and head golf professional at Rose Park Golf Course in Salt Lake City. And though the Utah Golf Association (UGA) reports an increase of 15,000 new memberships since 1991, some argue that the number of players in Utah hasn't kept up with the supply of new courses. "I think most of the new UGA memberships constitute handicap cards," claims Devin Dehlin, secretary for the Utah PGA. "According to the National Golf Association, the number of golfers between 1990 and 2000 has not gone up nationwide, and that should apply for Utah as well. There may be a slight increase in players across the state, but it doesn't represent a lot of growth."

With course supply high and demand remaining fairly con-

stant, competing clubs and resorts in the state have been forced to maintain low prices. What's more, they've kept greens fees under control without reducing the quality of the courses on which Utah golfers are accustomed to playing.

According to Elliott, whose Rose Park course charges just \$10 for nine holes, this high-quality versus low-price phenomenon is giving Utah a unique reputation among golfers throughout the country. "I have people who come here to play from other states, and they comment on how well the facility is taken care of compared to what they're used to playing on."

Although Rose Park is a municipally owned course and \$10 is on the low end of greens fees for the state, it's not much under par. Most public and municipally operated courses charge between \$12 and \$18 for nine holes, and \$16 and \$20 for 18 holes. South Mountain in Draper charges the highest fees for a municipal course at \$5 for 18 holes. Private clubs, even in areas of the state like St. George, only charge an average of \$40 for 18 holes, about double the price of public courses. Thanksgiving Point in Lehi comes in the highest for a public course at \$75. But, as Dehlin points out, "most courses in Las Vegas charge no less than \$125, and Thanksgiving Point, which is a championship course, would cost at least \$200 if it were anywhere but Utah."

Dehlin says another reason for the low-price/high-quality phenomenon is the high number of municipally owned courses in the state. "Nationally, about 80 percent of courses are private or public clubs with 20 percent comprising municipal facilities," says Dehlin. "In Utah, it's just

the opposite. Because of that, fees across the state are generally lower than you'd find in other parts of the country." That's due, as Dehlin notes, not only to the number of municipal courses, but also because public clubs and private resorts must compete in price and quality with such city and county courses.

Steve Elliott agrees. "Even privately owned courses and resorts like Stonebridge [in South Salt Lake] for instance, have had a tough time competing with municipally owned courses like Rose Park. That's because our course is just as beautiful and well-kept but our fees are usually less."

Even though Utah has a high percentage of municipal facilities, community recreation managers like to stress that those courses are not funded by citizen tax dollars, at least not within Salt Lake City and Salt Lake County.

"It keeps getting harder with the municipal courses to keep their prices low," says Toni Guest, a member of the Salt Lake City golf advisory board. "But that's because the city works very hard not to use taxes to fund such courses." Instead, they use what's called an "enterprise fund" to run facilities like any other non-government entity, using revenues to finance capital projects.

According to Elliott, that enterprise fund has been a life-saver for municipal courses along the Wasatch Front. "When the fund was started about 40 years ago, most planned for it to fail, but it has worked well in helping municipal courses support themselves and remain profitable."

But the stiff competition throughout the state raises the question of whether Utah golf clubs and courses, both public and private, will be able to remain profitable in the future. Revenues have started to flatten a bit over the

last three years and with overhead operating costs averaging around \$1 million per course per year, Utah golf clubs and resorts are scrambling to increase profits.

"Twenty years ago we had fewer golf courses and a fairly decent demand," remarks Elliott, "so we weren't concerned about being busy. Now we have to create more interest in the game of golf if we're going to keep up that revenue." With overall rounds of golf for the state down anywhere from 5,000 to 10,000 per course due to the large number of available courses, many clubs are resorting to discounting, offering specials, and creating new programs to generate more excitement in the game.

"What we need to do is develop new golfers," says Steve Wetherall, golf manager for Salt Lake City. "There needs to be an increased emphasis on teaching young people to golf, and more options created so that anyone who wants to play can take advantage of the game." He feels that without the advent of new golfers, the industry will stagnate. "The Tiger Woods phenomenon has made the game more popular among young people and we need to exploit that."

Guest agrees. "If the golf industry is going to survive in Utah, there's going to have to be more families playing together...more fathers passing interest down to their sons, and more mothers passing it down to their daughters."

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