

TRI-STATE GOLF NOT IN THE ROUGH

Options abound in the area despite a national trend of declining interest

BY JEFF MONTGOMERY
TH staff writer
jeff.montgomery@wcinet.com

GALENA, Ill. — Reagan Davis has read the headlines and heard the rumors.

The director of golf at Eagle Ridge Resort & Spa in Galena is all too aware of the growing perception that the game he loves is suddenly circling the drain. But Davis isn't buying into all the hysteria.

"Rumors of golf's death have been greatly exaggerated," he joked Tuesday, referencing a quotation

popularized by Mark Twain.

Davis acknowledges that golf might be in the middle of a rough patch. As a result, he is part of a growing contingent of golf professionals embracing new ideas and bold innovations to a game heavily entrenched in tradition.

Foot golf and hack golf are two innovations that already have made their way to Eagle Ridge. Elsewhere, indoor facilities are trying to draw in customers with "golf simulators," computerized programs that mimic the real-life golf experience.

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On video, the owner of Courtside talks about the golf simulator. Also, take our poll: Is golf a dying sport? **THonline.com**

"We've lost a number of golfers since 2008, and the game does have some issues," Davis said. "It is a game that does take a while to play, and it can take a lot of investment to get started. So anything we can do to foster new players, we need to be doing it."

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A golfer makes his way to the next hole at Bunker Hill Golf Course, in Dubuque, on Tuesday.

JESSICA REILLY • Telegraph Herald

GOLF: Younger crowd now more recreational golfers

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DECLINING NUMBERS

Davis' sense of urgency is understandable, given the slew of data suggesting major struggles for golf.

Statistics from the National Golf Foundation showed that only 14 new courses opened in the U.S. in 2013, while 157.5 golf courses closed (statistics are based on 18-hole courses). During the previous year, 13.5 courses opened while 154.5 closed.

Sales of golf equipment also are declining, according to industry leaders.

Dick's Sporting Goods has cited those declines as a primary factor for a drop in sales in each of the last two quarters. Sales of golf equipment dropped by nearly 10 percent in the first quarter of 2014. During the second quarter, more than 400 people employed as golf instructors at Dick's locations were laid off.

SIMULATOR

Jerry David, owner of Courtside Bar & Grill in Dubuque, also has heard many of the gripes against golf.

These concerns were part of what prompted him to purchase a golf simulator for Courtside in 2012.

Customers use real golf clubs and golf balls while playing on the simulator, which includes the layout for dozens of real golf courses.

After a ball is struck, an

intricate arrangement of sensors measures the speed and spin of the ball to determine its final landing location.

David estimated that, over the course of a full year, 10 to 12 rounds of golf are played at Courtside each week.

"Two of the biggest complaints you hear about golf are that it's too expensive and it takes too long," David said. "I think this (simulator) addresses both of those things."

David said 18 holes of simulated golf costs \$20 per person, while a typical round usually lasts 2½ hours.

FLEDGLING SPORTS

Davis hopes recent changes at Eagle Ridge will hold a similar appeal.

This month, the facility

opened one of its nine-hole courses to fledgling sports known as "foot golf" and "hack golf."

The former involves kicking a soccer ball along a course until it is placed into a 21-inch diameter cup; the latter largely resembles normal golf, with the lone exception of a wider hole measuring 15 inches in diameter.

The addition of "hack golf" to Eagle Ridge was supported by TaylorMade, which donated nine cups and flags valued at about \$4,000 total. TaylorMade made similar contributions to 99 other U.S. courses, as part of a larger initiative to make the game easier and more accessible to beginners, Davis said.

Lacoma Golf Club in East

Dubuque, Ill., opened one of its own nine-hole course for foot golf in late June.

Lacoma's head golf professional, Andy De Sollar, said the sport has exceeded expectations since its introduction.

He hopes some of the younger players interested in foot golf soon will transi-

tion to traditional golf.

"The younger crowd, in my opinion, is now made up a little bit more of recreational golfers as opposed to 10 years ago. There are not as many of the hardcore younger golfers who come out as frequently and spend a lot of time working on their game," he said.

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