

If You Build It, They Will Come

by ALEX CARTER

While the National Golf Foundation is about to release a new study on golf (see "Forethoughts" in this issue), their 1997 survey paints a bright picture for golf learning centers. For starters, baby boomers are, at long last, retiring and hitting the course with increasing frequency. According to the NGF statistics, avid golfers increased by six percent in 1997 and moderate golfers by a whopping 30 percent. Moreover, beginning golfers increased by 51 percent, including 2.4 million junior players. This bodes well for both the long and short-term future of golf, particularly instructional facilities.

That's because senior golfers have the time and money to attend clinics to fine-tune their play, while a bumper crop of junior golfers, inspired by Tiger Woods and other dynamic young players, will require basic and intermediate instruction. With that in mind, many savvy developers are building golf learning centers to increase sales and add lasting value to their properties.

Case Study: Belfair Plantation

Take, for instance, Belfair Plantation, a private residential golf community near Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Developed by John Reed, David Everett, and Ed Blakely, it encompasses 1,028 acres of prime Lowcountry land that was once a working plantation. Tom Fazio

designed its two 18-hole courses, which wind through mature forests, along pristine tidal marshes and around a lake where herons, egrets, and wood stork nests. This makes it one of the most visually stunning new golf communities in the country.

But its piece de resistance may well be a 30-acre learning center that's drawing rave reviews from residents such as David Bannister, an avid golfer with three teen-age sons. "The learning center and other elements told me that Belfair was much more

complete private facility of its type in the world. It will be available to residents of Belfair Plantation and their guests only.

The building was designed in the traditional Belfair Lowcountry vernacular with white beaded siding, gabled structures and brick hitting stalls accented by wisteria-grown trellises. It includes hitting rooms and classrooms for video analysis and lectures. Computerized video hitting stations analyze swings from all directions. Swing analyzer machines reveal club head speed, trajectory, open or closed face, distance, and slice or hook. Shots may be hit into nets or, if the overhead doors are raised, onto the practice range.

The practice range covers one end of a double-ended range. Located between the east and west courses, it offers two tees up to 175 yards wide and two fairways that allow tee shots up to 325 yards. There are also target greens for shots from 100 to 250

yards and putting and chipping greens with sand areas for hitting bunker shots to the chipping and target greens.

More than 350 yards away, at the opposite end of the range, lies the learning center. It is composed of two teaching tees, a large sloped and contoured putting green, and a short game practice area. With lagoons and fairways for hitting shots up to 100 yards, its two greens simulate course play.

than a housing development. I'd say its instructional facilities and other amenities are almost without parallel."

The developers wanted to distinguish Belfair from the competition by creating a community for serious golf enthusiasts. "We knew that golf instruction was a real trend in the business, so we decided to create a unique learning environment for our residents," says Blakely.

The developers, after much consultation, built what may be the most



"Most private developers won't build a practice facility because the land is too expensive, but Belfair designed and built a remarkable facility. It's been a big selling point for the community," says Tim Moss, head teaching pro at Belfair and a PGA Master Professional. "I'd say it impacts sales every day."

Opened in July 1996, the learning center was the first building completed at Belfair Plantation. According to Blakely, the developers invested approximately \$425,000 on the building, site work, equipment and furniture. They spent another \$300,000 on its outdoor areas. "We think it was a wise investment," he says. In fact, they all agree that the center has played an instrumental role in selling 440 of Belfair's 750 available sites, which range in price from \$110,000 to \$450,000.

"We determined that this investment would yield dividends and it has. The learning center stands on its own as an amenity that moves people to buy, and it also reinforces the concept of the overall community," Blakely says.

Reed concurs. "We're about a year and a half ahead of our sales schedule, and the learning center helped get us there," he says.

Case Study:

The Faldo Golf Institute by Marriott

Marriott Vacation Club International, the vacation ownership division of Marriott International Inc., is also answering the call for instructional facilities. After extensive market research indicated that their customers had a strong desire for such products, they forged a relationship with Nick Faldo and opened the Faldo Golf Institute by Marriott in 1996. Located within the company's luxu-

rious new 164-acre Grande Vista Resort in Orlando, Fla., the Institute lends marquee status to the extended-stay, vacation-villa community.

The Institute covers approximately 34 acres and features a nine-hole, 2,400-yard teaching course designed by Ron Garl. There's also a 27-hole championship putting course and five practice tees with more than 200



"We're about a year and a half ahead of our sales schedule, and the learning center helped get us there," says John Reed, one of the developers of Belfair Plantation.

hitting stations. Variable distance targets and numerous practice bunkers allow golfers to practice short irons and wedge shots and improve their sand play.

The 16,000-square-foot Grande Vista Clubhouse anchors the Institute. With its arched doorways, covered verandahs and red-tile roof, the St. Augustine-style facility reflects a graceful, timeless quality. It

houses a "Swing Studio" equipped with Vivid Vision digital video analysis equipment, a library of instructional resources, locker rooms, a pro shop and a restaurant.

Unlike the learning center at Belfair, the Faldo Institute is open both to Grande Vista residents and the public. Therefore, it is used to attract guests to the resort *and* as a profit center in its own right. Further, the company offers visits to the Institute as an incentive in their Marriott Rewards frequent guest program, through which they award gifts to brand-loyal guests.

"From a business perspective, golf schools are much like airplanes and theaters. To make money, owners must fill them with customers," says

Ed Utz, director of marketing for Marriott Golf and the Faldo Institute. Therefore, the company aggressively markets the Institute by offering individual lessons and a selection of instructional programs customized to meet the needs of specific groups of golfers. All are based on a curriculum developed by Nick Faldo. They range from half-hour lessons to three-day clinics for everyone from beginners to advanced players. They are taught by Faldo-certified PGA Professionals led by Director of Instruction Chip Koehlke.

Although the Institute offers programs for all levels of players, it emphasizes families because of its proximity to Orlando-area theme parks. It offers deep discounts to juniors who are accompanied by an adult, runs an LPGA girls' program, and hosts junior clinics during school holidays and summers. The popular summer events sold out in both 1997 and 1998 with more than 1,000 young golfers attending.

Refresher courses, programs targeting women golfers and programs

designed to attract local residents with special Florida prices in the summer, when tourists are in short supply, round out the curriculum.

Company officials say that the Institute has been highly successful in attracting guests to Grande Vista. "While we can't quantify the exact impact the Institute has had on sales at the resort, they have been significant," says Chris Watcha, director of sales at the Grande Vista.

It also increases the property's exchange value, an important element of time-share purchases. "People buy extended stays not only to occupy them but for exchange with other resorts. The Faldo Institute and other amenities make Grand Vista very attractive in that regard," says Utz.

The Institute has proven successful as an independent profit center as well. When Marriott first opened the facility, it offered special introductory prices to increase visitation. From this, they garnered a large database of customers. "We know that those golfers who enjoy instruction tend to make repeat visits," Utz says.

Indeed, the Faldo Institute has been successful on all fronts. In 1998, more than 5,000 people attended various lesson products, beating the goals set for that time period. "Overall sales have been strong and exceeded our expectations," Utz says. Now that the Florida location is operational, Marriott is considering opening other flagship Faldo Golf Institutes in Europe and the U.S., as well as a group of satellite golf schools.

The Faldo Institute and Belfair Plantation are quite different, but both have been very successful. This demonstrates that developers can use learning centers to attract clients and achieve varied sales goals. In short, these facilities prove that the old adage, "If you build it, they will come," holds true for well-conceived golf learning centers. ♣

Alex Carter is president of Nichols Carter Grant Architects and was principal in charge of the projects mentioned in this article.

Laurel Springs Golf Club

Forsyth County, Georgia

