

EVOLUTION OF THE PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT

TIME SEEMS RIGHT TO CHANGE-THE-RANGE

By David Gould, Staff Editor

Golf is a *game*, that we *play*, because it's *fun*. Then there's the range, where golfers go to *work* on their skills. Ranges look different than they used to—water jugs and ball pyramids have spruced them up—but the mood and mindset is little altered. Diligent, dutiful repetition, along the slow road to better ball-striking, is the atmosphere you typically find.

Certain factors and trends are challenging that status quo, however. The technique of supervised practice has the effect of gathering students into pods. There's a big push at clubs for new programming throughout all golf activities, which has led to more socializing and less solitude, even at the range. Ongoing exposure to Topgolf has also been influential, spurring questions about what constitutes a productive practice environment.

Decades ago at a roadside driving range in Maryland, the golf pro who owned it placed a junked car in the middle of the landing area, about 160 yards out. "Flagsticks just aren't

exciting targets," Gus Novotny explained. "I wanted something out there that was. If you hit the car it makes a bang, and you know you've added one more dent to it—people love that."

A wedge range, consisting of dispersed concrete slabs that send a ball bouncing up high on an accurate shot, isn't all that far from Novotny's dented sedan. And a program for women members that involves sipping wine at an umbrella table set up on the range, as they take turns hitting balls, isn't so different from the Topgolf model. Both are part of today's changing landscape.

The practice complex at Caves Valley Golf Club in Owings Mills, Maryland, is more open to innovation than ever these days. Proponent Group member Bernie Najar has adopted the thinking of colleague Mike Bender and installed a wedge range and not just one uneven-*lie* platform but two of them. He also sets up his launch monitor out on the tee line to conduct long-drive and closest-to-the-pin contests—and the rule is: No looking at your club delivery numbers during these games.

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Caves Valley is on the cutting edge of creating engagement during practice time with a multitude of props and informal competitions.



Mike Bender's wedge range engages golfers and improves training. It has been copied hundreds of times around the world.

"It can be peaceful or even therapeutic to spend an hour hitting balls by yourself," says Najar. "But along with that we want activity at the range that creates lots of informal competition and camaraderie, including some good-natured trash talking." Indeed that's the mood and the mindset of four golfers playing their five-dollar nassau, so why not try and foster something similar at the range? Najar says it will improve on-course performance, as a by-product. "If you don't feel some pressure when you practice, you won't be able to handle pressure when you play," he points out.

Also, the more games there are, the more chances for a player to notice their deficiency in a given area of performance. "A wedge ranges—even if it's just made of orange cones from Home Depot—sells wedge lessons," says Najar, who wants his players "in a gaming environment working on ball control" as much as they possibly can.

There are basically two ways to do the disrupting we're talking about. One involves the physical environment and the mood of the facility, the other involves styles and methods of practice. No one works the latter angle harder than Proponent member Trent Wearer, who wrote a book on the subject that is now a website, golfscrimmage.com. It's filled with competitive practice games, along with 'leaderboards' for everyone signed onto the site, private leaderboards for individual academies and a dashboard function so each golfer can archive

practice-game scores. Response to the site has been enthusiastic.

"I've said it before—golf has always been the worst 'practice sport' of all," Wearer muses. He's realizing of late that to gamify practice in the way his book and website propose to do, we may have to create more of a "game-on" feeling at the range. So, picture that launch-monitor setup Bernie Najar uses for contests, but add a spontaneity factor. "You're on the practice tee doing your normal routine and over the intercom there's an announcement of a 'flash' competition, happening in 10 minutes," theorizes Wearer. "The first six players who show up enter a 20-minute competition with a \$50 golf shop certificate for the winner." Taken to the extreme, it becomes like the classic British pub with the dartboard in the corner—you swing by on an impulse after work, to see if there's a competition you can join.

Twilight 9-hole golf leagues to fit the two free hours most people have on weekday evenings were a great idea long ago, Trent acknowledges. "Now maybe it's time to compress that down to twilight golf practice leagues, with team competitions and beers after," Wearer says, then adds: "The Drive, Chip and Putt program for kids is working great, is there some reason we can't do it with adults?"

When today's modern teaching professionals talk like that, you can almost hear the thump of an old range ball hitting the roof of a '57 Oldsmobile sedan. Ranges are changing, and it's high time.

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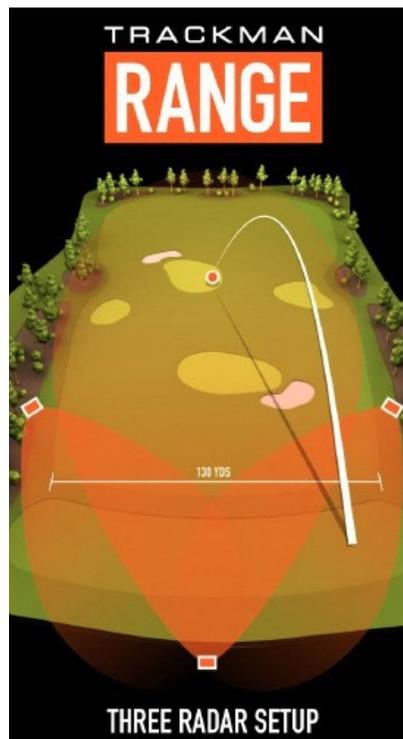
Modern teaching buildings have been a tremendous upgrade for delivering instruction, but have we similarly upgraded the range itself?

Coming (Fairly) Soon: TrackMan Range with Gamified Practice

Drag a striped ball into position, pick a target, take a swing, check where the shot landed, drag over another ball: That's the lather-rinse-repeat for most practicing golfers, most of the time. Serious instructors can persuade some of their committed students to follow a random-practice regimen in which they "play the golf course," in sequence, but that's a rare exception to normal patterns.

Some feel the antidote to this problem is on its way, through breakthrough products like Trackman Range. Now being perfected at a practice complex near Trackman's Denmark headquarters, Trackman Range is a system designed to bring precise feedback on the accuracy of every shot, along with a greengrass funhouse of competition and games, to a range near you. Its ingredients are of three radar installations (two in the landing zone, one behind the tee line), and the computing power of golfers' smartphones.

"You set up, open your phone to the Trackman Range app, click a command then hit one golf shot," says Jeff Viola, the Northeast sales representative for Trackman. "Once you've done that, the system recognizes you." At this point the



software will have "rendered the range and its configuration of targets on the screen of the phone," says Viola, allowing players to tell Trackman Range where they're aiming and get exact feedback on their accuracy. Two players side by side who know each other could then enter a two-person accuracy (or distance) contest, but competitions even with people one doesn't know could also commence, based on someone 10 bays over issuing a challenge.

"The golfer using this system doesn't even have to hit from a formal bay," says Jeff Viola, who is Northeast sales representative for Trackman. "They could be 60 feet from the practice chipping green, with a numbered cup as their selected target." With three-way triangulation of the radar units, a 135-yard tee line can be covered.

And now you might be sorry we told you all this, since 2017 is planned only as a pilot year for this technology, with just a half-dozen systems going into operation at U.S. golf facilities. It's all in preparation for a full rollout of Trackman Range in 2018, including a version that only needs one radar unit, although that system will cover about half the distance the full system does. — D.G.