

No Home-on-the-Range Required?

THE SWIFT AND COMPELLING RISE OF THE INDOOR ACADEMY

By **David Gould**, Staff Editor

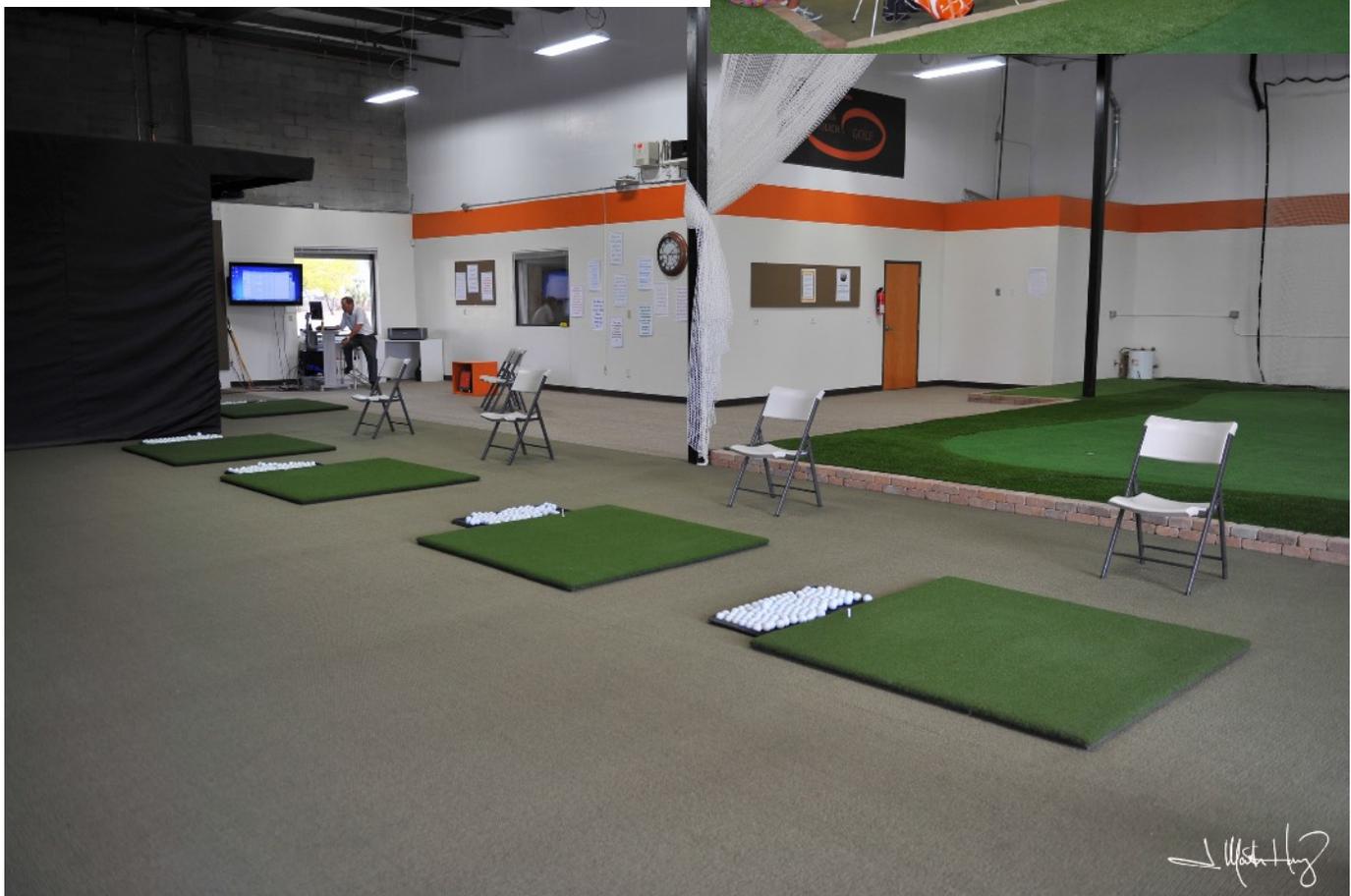
Depressed over rainy weekends and bitter about his property-tax assessment, the course owner watches as student after student arrives for lessons with his lead golf instructor, an independent contractor who pays rent and a percentage of his revenues to the course. In the sky over the far end of the range, dark clouds gather.

“Eventually,” says Tucson-based Proponent member Mark Polich, “that owner or his GM will tell you, ‘You’re leaching off this golf facility and making a pile of money while we get stuck with all the problems.’” What comes next, according to Mark, is either a demand for a higher revenue percentage or a memo saying don’t come back next season—if you aren’t booted sooner. “That’s the stuff no serious coach should have to put up with,” Polich

says, “but it seems to happen eventually, no matter what you do.”

Not if you run your own teaching business indoors—with no wind, no rain, no extreme heat or cold, no glare

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Mark Polich flipped the teaching model on its head by taking his lessons indoors year-round even though he works in a nearly rain-free, warm climate in Tucson, AZ. He notes that being unaffiliated with a golf course has given him complete freedom to teach who and what he

on the computer screen, no turf problems, no fixation on ball flight by the student, no questioning glances when you use unorthodox methods and no resentment from the poor schlubs over in the shop, who have to run a golf operation in the post-Boom era of slack demand and heavy green-fee discounting.

“If I want to launch a new program, I launch it—I don’t ask anyone to approve it,” says Polich. “If I want to raise rates or lower rates or do a little of both, there’s no discussion. The freedom you have in a situation like mine is awesome.”

Jeff Isler agrees, saying in no uncertain terms he “would never go back outdoors,” after 10 years running his Isler Performance Golf Academy in Southlake, Tex. But what jumps out from Jeff’s explanation of the indoor advantage is his belief about the teaching process working better inside four walls.

“The driving range can be a good place to practice, in some instances,” Isler says, “but in my view it’s a poor place to teach. Great coaches have done great work on the range through the years—I’m not taking anything away from their accomplishments—however I would much rather

use our technology in an indoor setting to get accurate, precise data so the student can work efficiently—without distractions—on mechanics. When that phase is accomplished I’ll send the player straight to the golf course.”

Jeff’s indoor training center functions as a controlled setting—a “lab” for full-swing analysis and study. “If you can’t hit the ball well in the lab,” he asks, “why add the wind and other variables you get at the range?” asks Isler. “Our very good players don’t want to hit balls on the range anymore. They want to train indoors then go play. The poor
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The Golf Room in Dublin, OH is the brainchild of Kyle Morris, who outfitted his 4,000 square foot space with the top technologies and a plethora of fitness equipment. In the first year of operation the facility generated more than \$350,000 in revenue.

players are the holdouts for outdoor practice.”

For Corey Badger, a Proponent Group member in Salt Lake City, the complications of dealing with a greengrass golf complex are rather unique. “Most of the public golf around us is municipally owned,” says Badger. “We do six figures in clubfitting revenues annually—it really does pay the bills—and no muni is going to let a concessionaire get away with earning that type of revenue for very long.”

Badger’s 11-year-old Golf Lab, also known as the Salt Lake City Indoor Golf Training Center, has an agreement with Mountain Dell Golf Club that allows for playing-lesson privileges and use of the short game area. Are there golfers who won’t patronize his climate-controlled learning center because they insist on outdoor coaching? Yes, and there is even a small proportion of people who have some type of phobia about swinging indoors and can’t even take the club back. But, according to Corey, there are more and more golfers who have “made the transition” and would strongly prefer not to go outside for training.

“At a certain point,” says Badger, “I make the suggestion that it’s time to go outside, so I can see them play the course and see their short game.

But today there is five inches of new snow on the ground, so we’re indoors and we’re happy.” Of course, you’re best off inside if you try to at least simulate the outdoor environment, rather than give people something that “seems like a cave,” as Badger puts it. That means bright lighting in the teaching bays along with a tall and wide screen a good distance away. (A screen is better than netting, many say, because the “whump” sound provides helpful feedback.)

What really matters to him is the fact that “people get better faster,” as Corey simply puts it. Whether that’s because they don’t get distracted by their missed shots, or because the TrackMan, KVest and Swing Catalyst readings become more

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Urban Golf Performance in Los Angeles possesses significant expertise in biomechanics, exercise science, connective tissue therapy and neuroscience, plus the quality of its facilities attracts L.A. fitness freaks who come in as non-golfers then start learning the game.

prominent in their minds, is difficult to say. His fellow indoor coaches all agree that things happen quicker inside.

Proponent Group member Kyle Morris even has an “indoorsy” name for his wintertime teaching sanctuary, The Golf Room. Highly successful for such a newly fledged instructor (Morris only quit his professional playing career in 2015) he is happy to be out on the range of The Golf Club of Dublin during the warm Ohio summers, yet his brand seems more directly based on what The Golf Room offers and provides.

“It’s been unreal,” is how Morris describes customer acceptance of The Golf Room and its 4,000 square feet of skill-improvement capabilities. “We’re open 65 hours a week and on average there are clients in here 60 of those hours, multiple clients much of the time, going through one phase or another of what we offer.” That includes two TrackMan bays, K-Vest 3D and K-Vest 6D, custom clubfitting, the BodiTrak Golf

System mat to record balance distribution information and “center of pressure” during the swing, a neuro-feedback device for brain activity monitoring, plus HeartMap for a glimpse into cardio and central nervous system patterns. With all of this data to consider, it’s just as well there’s no ball flight to get hung up on.

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Jeff Isler’s recent move to an all indoor setting in Las Colinas, TX near Dallas has seen tremendous business growth. He has had to quickly add more instructors to keep up with the demand which is now grossing nearly \$1 million annually.

One thing about the roof-and-four-walls approach, it makes a big spend on technology an absolute necessity. Morris jumped right in with a \$150,000 investment in the tech tools, but says that with the help of these assets he will beat his first-year pro forma revenue number of \$350,000. Is it all potentially intimidating? To some prospective clients, yes, but that can be turned around quickly, say those with experience. “The whole ‘I’m not a good enough golfer’ thing will happen at times,” says Morris. “I’ll explain to them how far off the desired club path and clubface angles they are, and how quickly we can fix that if we just rely on the technology and stay focused.”

One of the most impressive indoor golf centers in the U.S. is plunk in the middle of Los Angeles, the four-year-old Urban Golf Performance center founded by former college golfer and Bill Eschenbrenner protege Mac Todd. On staff there as director of coaching is Proponent Group member Neil Hunter-Smith, a Scottish-bred professional who oversees a staff of five and whose resume includes a stint at the world’s largest golf resort, Mission Hills in China. According to Hunter-Smith, the degree of expertise UGP now possesses in biomechanics, exercise science, connective tissue therapy and neuroscience, plus the quality of its facilities, even attracts L.A. fitness freaks who come in as non-golfers then start learning the game.

“UGP is proving that the golf training environment can satisfy even a very sophisticated fitness market like Los Angeles, if you do it correctly,” says founder Mac Todd. At the same time, Todd is deeply committed to creating and maintaining a deep, nuanced golf culture within his facility and as part of its brand. “With all the digital devices, I don’t want our young coaches not understanding the genius of Harvey Penick and what he achieved with his students,” says Todd. “We can do the sophisticated coaching science at a high level and still continue the great traditions of golf by maintaining that passion for the game that we all grew up with.”

The values Todd refers to are intrinsic to what Proponent Group tries to help spread, but so is professionalization of the teaching-coaching profession—and the indoor academies seem



Paul Ramee, Jr., while focused on his GM role at Bulls Bridge Golf Club in Kent, CT in the summertime, has his own indoor facility in town for cold New England winters.

particularly tuned in to that business imperative. “We did almost \$1 million in revenue this year,” says Jeff Isler of his 2016 business performance. “We’re profitable. We had our best year since we started a decade ago.” In the early days, Isler was a teaching pro who “taught an hour and got paid for an hour,” but he always pursued the goal of breaking out of that rut. Having the control an indoor facility provides allowed for more diversity and creativity in the programming and pricing, which served Jeff’s goals mightily.

“We’re something different now, from when I started,” he says, with a mix of relief and satisfaction. “We’re not one teacher with a lesson book, or two teachers with their lesson books, we’re a sports training organization. We’re a true, functioning, sustainable business.” **PG**