

Storefront Golf Venues Promise New Opportunities

GOLF ON THE MOVE TO MAIN STREET

By David Gould, Staff Editor

It's often said that golf competes not simply against other sports but against leisure activities of all kinds. Given how physically remote golf courses tend to be, the game can find itself out of sight and out of mind. But that's changing. The popularity of simulators and shot-monitoring data, along with the big problems facing retail in general, has opened a path for golf to move into storefronts and otherwise locate itself within the everyday traffic patterns of urban and suburban Americans.

GolfTEK started the trend—it now has 180-plus studios in high-visibility locations. The Main Street clubfitter Club Champion is up to 20 locations nationwide, and growing. Recently in Orlando a sports bar named Dewey's Indoor Golf & Sports Grill opened, with crossed golf clubs in its logo and nine sports simulators, golf being the most popular choice of patrons. En route from the dry cleaner to the post office you wouldn't pass the entrance to an 18-hole course, but now there are ball-hitting opportunities coming online in many a commercial area.

Ironworks Golf Lab is a satellite of the 110-year-old Beloit Club, in Beloit, Wisconsin. The club has been owned for two-plus years by a unit of Hendricks Commercial Properties. HCP was started 40 years ago by Diane Hendricks, reportedly the wealthiest self-made woman in the world and a staunch supporter of Rust Belt urban renewal. Lots of new buildings and businesses in downtown Beloit are Hendricks-funded, and Ironworks Golf Lab—with its high-tech hitting bays, simulator booths and modest bar-and-grill, is a strategic tool to add fun to the mix.

"When club members are downtown, this is a place for them to bring clients and guests," says Proponent Group member Mike Tabbert, one of the golf professionals who splits time between the suburban club and the 8,000-square-foot downtown learning-and-leisure center. Tabbert and fellow Proponent member Travis Becker are the core staff of Ironworks, using instruction as a driver of the business. "We are building



Bar and snack area at Ironworks Golf Lab, a "division" of the greengrass Beloit Club in Wisconsin.



The Lab's short-game practice area.



A birthday-party putting competition at Ironworks Golf Lab likely provided some kids with their first chance to hold a club.

our walk-in business, along with group events like birthdays and bachelor parties,” says Tabbert. “One goal is to have Ironworks serve as feeder program for signing up new Beloit Club members.”

The storefront facility that Ironworks inhabits is set up in such a way as to balance intense training for hardcore players with birthday-party fun for 12-years-olds who start with the other arcade sports games then wander into a golf bay. “These are kids who never had their hands on a club but now they do, so it’s a start,” says Tabbert.

Another way for golf to get high visibility is by joining the tide of unusual tenants at so-called “dying” malls or even “dead” malls, of which there are hundreds. Entrepreneurs have acquired these properties at distressed prices and repurposed them as medical centers, churches, community colleges, elementary schools apartments and office spaces. If the re-envisioning of retail space continues adding new uses, sports like golf are almost certain to be part of the changeover.

When there's lots of square footage there's a better chance to bring the fitness element into the mix. Indeed, golf shows impressive versatility in its capacity to serve as the centerpiece of entertainment-based facilities like Dewey's or Topgolf and of fitness-based companies like Urban Golf Performance and Golf Fitness Los Angeles. Can any other sport play both those roles?

Articles have been written about the trend toward top instructors—including many Proponent members—moving their operations indoors, and this trend dovetails with that one, adding an entertainment factor. The more it continues, the more simple it will be for golf instructors to have places to teach no matter the local weather. Outdoors on green fairways with a breeze blowing will always be the true home of the sport, but the



The brand-new Dewey's Golf and Sports Bar in Orlando has many sports on simulator, but golf is by far the most popular.

chance to swing, play, compete and improve without going outside is more and more available—to avid players and newcomers alike. **PG**



It's a long journey from a sports-bar putting simulator to the first tee of a regulation course.