

Golf Thriving (Not Just Surviving) Amid Pandemic

How Local Courses Navigated a Year of Uncertainty

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Photos: National Golf Foundation

There was little need for Ed Stevenson to study the April ledger sheet when he walked into his office on May 1, 2020. Golf, after all, had been banned by the governor's office throughout the entire month due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of his duties, Stevenson, the executive director of the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, manages the district's three golf properties. Beyond the woes of April, he couldn't have been overly optimistic of much improvement in coming months. A revision of the executive order allowed for four twosomes to tee off every hour going forward. How could any golf course make money hosting 40 guests a day?

The woes of DuPage County's courses, of course, were mirrored at the 350+ other public golf courses across Illinois. And as disastrous as April was for them, the challenge of staffing and maintaining clubs for a few dozen players from May through the foreseeable future was beyond daunting; it was downright catastrophic. Along with the standard daily expenses required to operate, managers had to deal with new responsibilities including clubhouse sanitation, cart cleaning and vigilance to ensure players were following protocols. As long as the

governor's position on golf as a potential virus super-spreader sport was maintained, economic challenges were inevitable.

"We knew by mid-March that the Illinois golf season wasn't going to be normal due to the pandemic," said Stevenson. "We just didn't know when or if things were going to get better going forward. Every golf course operator in the country wanted his patrons to be safe, of course. So we just had to wait for the situation to improve."

Like Illinois, the state of Michigan was originally reluctant to allow golf to resume while the pandemic raged across the country. Governor Gretchen Whitmer deemed golf a non-essential business in March and didn't lift that designation until April 24th with the provision that golf carts be banned to ensure social distancing.

As vice-president of Gull Lake View Golf Club & Resort in Kalamazoo, Bill Johnson confronted the imposing task of opening up six golf courses that sat idle awaiting Whitmer's executive order to be lifted. "The numbers certainly differ between resorts and stand-alone golf courses," said Johnson. "So being in Michigan, here's the actual truth: our April rounds were down 93%. By May we were 'only' down 38%."

Indeed, Gull Lake View Resort had to overcome additional burdens throughout the entire 2020 golf season. Not only were Michigan golf courses unable to open until late April, a resort that caters to golfer groups from a three-state region would necessarily be slowed down by both travel and overnight stay restrictions. "It was looking bleak," Johnson added. "Lodging was down 100% in April and 80% in May. With no lodging, no restaurants, events, or alcohol sales, our only source of revenue was green fees. We did notice by May that golf was gaining ground and popularity. That was the saving grace."

Even though April and May were miserable months for golf courses across the country due to the pandemic, it turned out that the diligence of golf course operators in positioning golf as a safe, socially distant sport proved to be a critical factor in persuading governors to rethink their positions. Given the safeguards put in place by operators—including limited foodservice, no rakes in bunkers, no touching of flagsticks, no ball washers, and limitations on golf cart usage—golf stood out as an outdoor game that was inherently socially distant. Prompted by advisory committees largely made up of state golf course associations, state PGA administrators, and golf course operator organizations, governors across the country eased restrictions on the amount of play allowed along with food and beverage service. So even as the pandemic continued to rage across the country, golf courses were opened for business, albeit with continued constraints on indoor dining and cart usage. With soccer fields, ballparks, movie houses, and basketball courts shuttered, golf suddenly, fantastically, and (almost) miraculously became one of the few group recreational activities allowed by state governments.

In Illinois, foursome golf was formally permitted to resume with tee times spaced 10 minutes apart at 6 a.m. on May 29th. Many restrictions remained in place, including: no flagstick removal, no congregating in groups larger than 10, the bottom of cups to be elevated to an inch below rims for ease of ball removal, 50% capacity allowed on practice ranges and putting greens, golf carts for solo use only (but members of the same household could ride together), sanitization of carts after use, clubhouse to remain closed, and individual caddies were prohibited. Also, no handshakes were allowed.

While some of the restrictions seemed over-protective, they were meticulously crafted to create confidence within the governor's office that

golf would not become a "super-spreader" activity. CDGA Executive Director Robert Markionni said that the association worked with the Illinois PGA and other state golf groups to develop a common ground that would address every aspect of golf as a responsible, socially distant experience.

"We spoke as one voice," said Markionni. "While we all wanted golf to resume in Illinois, the safety of players and course staff was the first priority. Without all of these protective measures being volunteered, it was pretty clear that there would be no golf."



Andy Mickelson, director of golf at Mistwood Golf Club in Romeoville, echoed Markionni's position.

"I think the thing that allowed me to personally keep my sanity was being involved with the IPGA board and the governor's office directly," said Mickelson. "Our strategy was pretty simple and not politically motivated. We presented a case to the governor's office of how we could best operate while keeping public safety first and foremost. Constant engagement by the allied golf associations, our IPGA Board, and especially our executive director really pushed things forward. We always believed that if we could best make the case in the court of public opinion and additionally find the right folks in the governor's office to listen, we could prove that golf was a perfectly safe activity. On top of that, the mental health of playing and being outside far outweighed any dangers to golfers even at the height of the virus concerns."

As many Illinois courses had already opened—even on a limited basis—in early May, most of the infrastructure to cater to 40 players per hour was

already in place by the first week of June. The big unknown was what kind of demand there would be for golf during a pandemic and whether that demand was sustainable.

The weather throughout all of June was perfect for golf, with temperatures on most days in the low 80s and not much rainfall. Very quickly, it became obvious to operators that golf had come roaring back. Not just in Chicago and not just in Illinois. Courses across the country were reporting tee sheets filling up from dawn until dusk. And due to restrictions on cart usage as well as limited supplies of carts due to single-driver requirements, golfers got used to walking 18 holes.

“That was probably the most interesting aspect of last season,” Markionni of the CDGA said. “Golfers might have started out walking due to cart restrictions but then, even when some of those were lifted and supply had increased, many golfers wanted to keep walking. Golf wasn’t just fun for them, it was also a chance to exercise.” He added that the golf operators he talked to didn’t mind the loss of cart revenue. “Sure, some income was lost. But the general feeling was that golfers who wanted to walk would return again and again. That was an even better outcome.”

How popular was golf in Chicagoland in 2020? A metric used by the CDGA is the number of rounds posted in the association’s handicap system. In 2020, the number was 1,828,730 scores. That compares to 1,675,977 rounds posted for all of 2019—a 9% increase despite losing all of April and with limited play in May. A more dynamic comparison is found reflecting the number of rounds posted from May 1, 2019 to the end of the year (1,443,450) vs. the number of rounds posted from May 1, 2020 to the end of the year (1,749,293). That increase of 305,843 rounds shows a whopping percentage increase of 21.2% year-over-year. This despite the limited play of twosomes allowed every 15 minutes last May.

The numbers with DuPage County Golf were even more remarkable, reflecting green fee revenues of \$2.95 million—38% above those revenues from 2019. While the county saw a loss in food and beverage revenue due to clubhouse restrictions and golf outing banquets, the county was able to show a net gain of \$834,871 for the year, again despite losing all of April and a good portion of May.

“None of us could have predicted the way golf came roaring back in June,” said Stevenson. “Not only were our Maple Meadows and The Preserve at Oak Meadows courses busy,” he said. “Our 9-hole Green Meadows course attracted golfers who wanted to walk but just for nine holes.”

Mickelson said that the most encouraging element to Mistwood Golf Club was where those pockets of growth came from. “We were seeing significant family engagement in the game, first time golfers, re-engaged golfers, and most importantly, massive expansions in junior golf. Our reach to juniors, particularly through programs like PGA Junior League, more than doubled in participation year-over-year.”

Mickelson went so far as to predict continued growth in 2021 when, presumably, ballparks will open to some capacity along with soccer fields and restaurants. “I think we are entering a golf renaissance,” he said. “Golfers who were either new to golf, re-engaged, and juniors will continue to be strong consumers for the foreseeable future. Yes, other sports and distractions will come along as we open things back up, but the seed and roots that were planted in 2020 run deep and we will see this tree bear fruit for a while (hopefully!).”



Markionni of the CDGA was similarly optimistic about the new season. “For starters, we know that April and May are bound to be better than in 2020,” he said. “We certainly expect that people will go back to some of their normal activities like coaching baseball and attending sporting events. But we’d like to think that the great experiences golfers had in 2020 will bring them back to the course this year, even as COVID-19 restrictions ease.”

The CDGA plans to run a full slate of amateur tournaments in 2021, kicking off with Mid-Amateur Qualifying in April and extending through the 90th Illinois State Amateur Championship July 20-22 at Mistwood Golf Club.

In reflecting on the 2020 season, Bill Johnson felt that the pandemic’s impact on golf had even larger implications than just increased play and revenues. “Five years from now it is my guess that most will think about the pandemic,” he said. “My mind goes to the social injustices that came to the forefront in 2020. At a time when others were talking about cancel culture and exclusion, golf truly became a game of inclusion. We saw people of all races, ages and genders flock to their local courses. At a time of chaos, golf offered tranquility. Those who were new to golf or who returned after being away rediscovered what we always knew: that this game is safe, communal, challenging and fun.”

Tahoe Unmasked

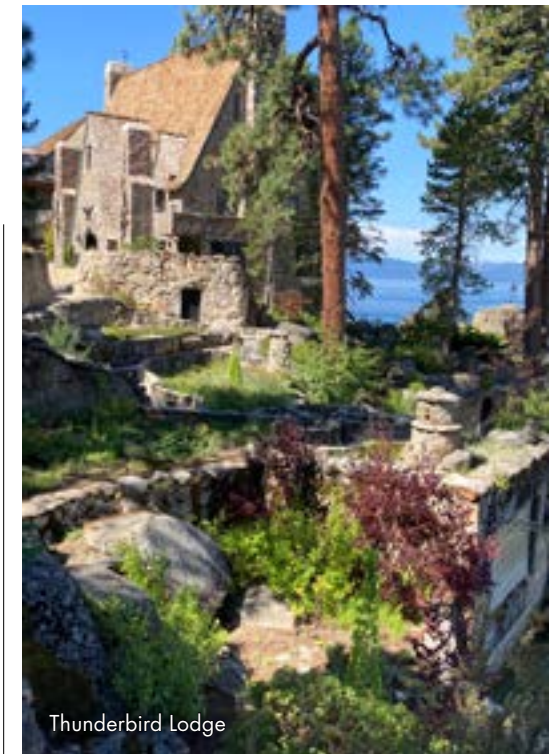
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Genoa Lakes GC



Toiyabe GC



Thunderbird Lodge

speedboat known as “Thunderbird.” The Lodge is now a part of the state park system; call ahead for tour times. Visit them at thunderbirdlodge.org

Moving on from the lake scene to the valley environ, the switchback road over the Kingsbury Grade, topping out at 7,344-feet, drops into Carson Valley (20 minutes from South Shore) where the Lakes Course at Genoa Lakes Golf Club and the semi-private Robert Muir Graves-designed Toiyabe Golf Club (five minutes north of Carson City) are accentuated by the dramatic backdrop of the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada. While both are excellent options, the Lakes Course may tip the scale with the 19th hole, a no-brainer straight shot to “Nevada’s Oldest Thirst Parlor” in the nearby town of Genoa, established 1853.

Shifting Gears

Before attempting any strenuous outdoor activity in a higher elevation, make sure your heart and lungs are in good working order. In no time flat after traveling from sea level, they will be tested to the max. Especially when starting at 7,000 feet and huffing and puffing your way to 8,157 feet on a mountain bike along the notorious 14-mile (one way) Flume Trail. Don’t make this your first stop off of the plane. Give your body a couple days to acclimate and thank us later.

The 10-minute shuttle ride from the bike shop at Tunnel Creek Café delivers bikers to the trailhead located at Spooner Lake day use area in the Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park. Greeted with more than 1,000- feet of climbing during the first four miles (and the body screaming

“turn back!” while watching motor-assisted e-bikes whiz by) the chugging continues on the rolling uphill terrain through Aspen Grove on the Carson Range to the top at Marlette Saddle. Fair warning: regardless how much oxygen is inhaled and exhaled, the ride is about to pay huge dividends.

At the dam on Marlette Lake is where the single-track 4.5-mile Flume Trail starts. It traverses along the mountainside high above Sand Harbor and offers spectacular vistas of Lake Tahoe. The track drops 40 feet per mile.

“Make sure if you want to look at the views, stop and look. Don’t become part of the view by riding off the trail,” says Max Jones, two-time national mountain bike champion and owner of Flume Trail Bikes.

Once reaching the end of Flume Trail, all that remains to stay injury free is a three-mile, 1,500-foot descent to the finish line and a look back at an experience that takes your breath away.

With all bones still intact and no visible scars, the door sadly shuts on a much-needed getaway, far from a pandemic-induced hibernation. This Lake Tahoe experience definitely has us fired up for an encore.

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