

How golf is changing the rules for millennials

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By DANNY ECKER



Here's how desperate golf clubs have become: They're adding sound systems, craft beer and even "footgolf" to bring out millennials, a generation that shows little interest in their dads' weekend pastime.

Roughly 6.4 million members of Generation Y—men and women in the 18-to-34-year-old range—golfed last year. That's only about two-thirds the number in that cohort who played 20 years ago, according to the National Golf Foundation, a consulting firm in Jupiter, Fla. It also is just 7.7 percent of the 83.1 million in this generation.

The falloff is hurting revenue and profit particularly in Chicago, where the supply of golf courses already far exceeds demand. That's why club owners are bending the rules in an attempt to win over a generation known for self-absorption, a fixation with social media and short attention spans. "If we want to be sustainable, we have to embrace more than just golf," says Matt McIntee, CEO of Green Golf Partners, a Danville, Ind., company that runs seven courses in Illinois.

One of them, Kemper Lakes Golf Club in northwest suburban Kildeer, provides players with speakers to pump music from their carts while they play. Anything that disruptive was taboo at most clubs for decades, but two of every five millennial golfers today play music out loud on the course, according to a recent survey of 3,000 adults by the NGF.

Another break with convention: 30 metro Chicago courses this year offer footgolf, a hybrid that has players kicking a soccer ball through the course instead of hitting a golf ball. The hole also is huge.

"You're hoping to draw people to your golf course that may be very active, younger people, but maybe haven't had any purpose or reason to step foot on a golf course in their life," says Jim Rafferty, assistant manager at Salt Creek Golf Club. That course, owned and operated by the Wood Dale Park District, generated close to \$10,000 in revenue last year from nearly 700 footgolf rounds, mainly played by 20-somethings.

The disinterest in golf isn't limited to young adults. In 2014, 1.75 million rounds of golf were played by the 80,000 members of the Chicago District Golf Association on the approximately 250 courses in the Chicago area—the fewest of any year since at least 2007. The group projects this year's total to remain flat. It would be down 2 percent from 2013 and 7 percent from 2012.

Though millennials account for only 20 percent of all rounds played, according to the NGF report, the foundation projects that some 4 million of them are prospective players. Most fall into a subset it calls "brunch ballers," people more likely than golfers overall to take mulligans, improve their lie before shots and not keep score. These prospects are "much more likely to enhance the experience with music, alcohol, gambling and social media engagement," the report concludes.

In an attempt to score points with 20-somethings, Northbrook-based KemperSports is testing a golf event this summer at one of the 13 courses it operates here that features beer tastings from 15 craft breweries throughout the course.

The company also recently partnered with a youth-centric golf apparel company, Link soul of Oceanside, Calif., to dole out weekly prizes to golfers who post the best photos from their courses on Instagram.

Some clubs are trying to hurry up the game, knowing that an instant-gratification generation doesn't want to spend hours on the links. The Chicago Park District now offers six-hole evening rounds every other week at its Sydney R. Marovitz Golf Course. Another KemperSports property, Harborside International Golf Course near Chicago's Pullman neighborhood, offers 72-player shotgun start rounds—foursomes starting from all 18 holes at the same time—at 5:55 a.m. on select Thursdays, to cater to players who might play a quick round before heading to work. "This generation doesn't do things for four, four-and-a-half hours at a time," KemperSports CEO Steve Skinner says.

Then there's footgolf. The Illinois Footgolf Association estimates that as many as 11,000 footgolf rounds were played around Chicago in 2014,

mostly costing between \$10 and \$15 per round without a golf cart. The Wood Dale Park District spent \$6,500 to renovate one of Salt Creek's two nine-hole courses to allow footgolf during times when few golfers tend to show up.

These newfangled ways upset some traditional golfers who still make up the bulk of the business. For that reason, Salt Creek asks footgolfers to maintain the same etiquette as regular golfers. "We expect them to behave like they're at a golf course," Rafferty says.

