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FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2015 - VOL. CCLXVI NO. 144

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To Golfers' Delight, Warm Weather Means Tee Time in December

Unusually mild temperatures bring crowds to U.S. golf courses

By MATTHEW FUTTERMAN

Last week, members of Long Island's Old Westbury Golf and Country Club received an unusual email for the middle of December. The club would be holding a tournament Sunday morning.

Head pro Mike Meehan expected maybe 30 players to sign up for what he called the Global Warming Open. He ended up with 60, plus another 70 who showed up wanting to play a leisurely round. By the afternoon, the temperature hit 68 degrees and players were grateful Mr. Meehan had unearthed shorts from the pro shop—the better to show off pale legs ambling across the course.

"It looked like it was the middle of July out there," said

club president Barry Swidler, who shot an 84, one of his best rounds of the year—even though he had to use an old set of clubs, having already shipped his favorite gear to Florida for the winter.

Four years ago, after a white-out winter, ski resorts in Lake Tahoe had visitors bombing down snow-covered slopes on July 4 weekend. Now the golf business is enjoying the whims of mother nature. From New England to the Midwest, managers of golf courses that are usually long-closed have been filling tee times for much of December from daybreak until as long as the daylight allows.

"We had a whole bunch of people out last Wednesday," said Chris Argires, a retiree and member of Kemper Lakes Golf Club in Kildeer, Ill. After the round, the golfers ventured to the club's patio, built a fire in the fire pit and enjoyed cigars and drinks into the early evening. "It's always like this in Chicago in December," Mr. Argires joked.

Matt McIntee, chief executive of Green Golf Partners, which manages 18 courses mostly throughout the Midwest, had to shut down a construction project last December because the ground was frozen solid. This year he's scrambling to make sure all the carts stay charged and to find enough workers to serve beers and grill hot dogs so duffers get the same service in the weeks before Christmas that they're used to in August.

"It's like winning the lottery for these golfers," Mr. McIntee said. "They don't expect to be outside unless they are freezing on the way to the subway or skiing somewhere."

Will McIntosh, senior vice president for business development for the Golf Channel, which also owns the tee-time booking service GolfNow, said the number of late-year golf games has been as stunning as a hole-in-one. Last December, GolfNow booked 4,500 tee times throughout the entire Northeast and Midwest. This December, it has already booked 39,000 in those regions.

"We had to staff up in customer service to support the call volume," he said.



Golfers waiting to tee off at Jester Park Golf Course in December, enjoying the warm weather. More than 100 golfers played at Jester Park Golf Course that day. PHOTO: GREEN GOLF PARTNERS

At Jester Park Golf Course in Granger, Iowa, golfers played 590 rounds during the first 10 days of December compared with eight last year. At New Berlin Hills Golf Course in Wisconsin, there were 1,780 rounds played between Nov. 1 and Dec. 10, compared with 460 during that same period in 2014.

And it has been real golf, too. No temporary tees or greens—props that are common this time of year to keep golfers from walking on the most delicate grass when it is frozen and prone to damage.

In fact, winter golf has plenty of advantages. Leaves are gone from both the trees and the ground, so golfers can

usually find the occasional wayward tee shot. A lack of greenery also means a far easier shot through the trees to get back on the fairway or to reach the green. Thanks to cool nights and harder ground, the ball rolls farther. The sun is soft. The bugs are dead.

Mr. Swidler said late-year golf in the New York City area provides yet another big boon. The Metropolitan Golf Association doesn't require members to record scores after Oct. 31. As a result, he can play well and his handicap—a calculation that allows golfers of different abilities to compete against one another—won't go down. "I put up low score Sunday, and my handicap didn't even move!" he boasted.

At Bethpage State Park on Long Island, site of the 2002 and 2009 U.S. Opens, three of the five courses are fully open on weekends. Joe Rehor, the director of golf, said the New York park played host to more than 400 rounds last weekend. A typical mid-December Saturday might see a few dozen golf nuts willing to brave the cold.

"It makes up for what was probably the worst spring we ever had in this business with all the rain and cold," Mr. Rehor said.

Since most golf courses in colder regions budget for little, if any, activity during the winter, the revenue is essentially found money for an industry that needs some good news.

Nationally, annual participation has remained flat of late, with about 25 million people playing at least one round in 2014, according to the National Golf Foundation.

In the Northeast and Midwest, business typically winds down to a near-halt late in the year. Last December, golfers played just 70 rounds in all of Iowa, according to research done by the PGA of America. Dennis Whitlatch of Waukegan, a retired savings and loan examiner, has already been out five times this month. "It's better than sitting at home," Mr. Whitlatch said.

With more unseasonably warm patches predicted, Mr. Whitlatch was eyeing next Monday and Tuesday, when meteorologists were calling for mostly sunny skies and highs in the 40s. Only Christmas would remain off-limits—but not because of the weather.

"I don't know whether that would really work with the wife and family," he said.

