

Golf bringing families together during ongoing pandemic



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By Michael Riley Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Canada has nearly six million golfers who either play frequently or are more occasional players of the game. The golfing industry also employs over 300,000 people nationally and over 100,000 in Ontario. As of 2019, its economic impact in Canada was over \$14 billion. While millennials may have turned their backs on the game somewhat, golf is still big business here in Canada. However, playing a round or two of golf will be a bit different this year due to the restrictions still in place due to COVID-19. Plus, those operating revenues have been suffering and will continue to suffer throughout the golfing season. One of the first effects of COVID-19 on the game of golf has been the postponement of National Golf Day in Canada, originally scheduled for May 12. The National Allied Golf Association issued this statement upon the postponement of this event. "The postponement of National Golf Day in Canada includes the We Are Golf government advocacy visit to Parliament Hill in Ottawa; an event aimed at raising awareness among government decision makers on the many positive aspects of the golf industry. We appreciate that all government officials are directing their full attention and resources to support the health and safety of Canadians during this unprecedented health crisis. When the time is right, the Canadian golf industry will be ready to share the significant economic, health, employment, tourism and charitable impact of golf in communities from coast to coast. We are Golf is committed to ensuring the health and safety of our members, golfers, staff, volunteers and industry stakeholders as well as every Canadian in the communities where we live, work and play," they said. Greg Chambers is the regional director of the National Golf Course Owners' Association of Canada, eastern Ontario/Outaouais chapter. He says the financial impact has been pretty simple. "It's a seasonal business so you can't get those months back, so some of the courses are down at least a month. We had a great spring this year, so some courses could have been open in late March. Some of the courses in southwestern Ontario were open when the mandated closure happened, so they had to shut back down, so they were losing dollars right away. It's been different with different types of courses. With public courses, which have green fees and tournaments, semi-private courses with lots of members, maybe higher end, and private courses, which collected membership dues over the winter and are usually the last to open. The private courses open up when the greens are at optimal condition, whereas the public courses will open up as soon as they can, and if the course isn't in perfect condition, they'll just charge lower green fees," he says. Chambers says the driving ranges are probably feeling the financial strain the most during this time. They usually open up in mid-March or earlier, and this is where they get their business. People come out in advance of the golfing season before the courses open to practice their swing and try to perfect their game. "So that's where the loss of revenue is really being felt, because these ranges can't get those months back. Everybody's now jumping into the golf courses," he says. On the

plus side, the golf courses in Ontario, which opened up May 16, have been quite busy, and are booked several weeks in advance. I can't say enough about what a good job the owners are doing. They really looked at making it safe for everybody. For example, there's now a mandatory minimum 250 yards between playing groups (of five people or less) both in front of and behind them. We kind of lucked out as some provinces opened up before us, like B.C., so we were able to be guided by their best practices," he says. Chambers says he and the NGCOA have recommended reducing the touchpoints at the courses and if there are any touchpoints, maximizing their sanitation before and after use. This would apply to pull carts, motorized golf carts and the washrooms. They have also temporarily gotten rid of wash buckets on the courses, the rakes in the sand traps and score cards. Patrons are being asked to bring their own cards and to not share them with others. Courses that offer rental clubs also have some extra work cut out for them. "It is up to the courses in question, whether they have the staff and the resources to keep offering rentals. Especially with public courses, a lot of their clientele are new or newer golfers looking to improve their game. With COVID-19 and perhaps being out of work, or working from home, they now have that extra time to take up golf, but may not have their own clubs. The courses now have to sanitize these rental clubs before renting them out, the guest must use the clubs and not share them with anybody else, and when they're returned, staff does not touch them until they've been thoroughly sanitized for the next client," he says. Restaurants at these courses are now strictly doing takeout, and beverage carts are being used with restrictions so golfers can have access to beverages. This has resulted in some lost revenue as golfers can no longer come in to sit down and enjoy a longer and most likely more expensive meal. Another way that golf courses are losing revenue this year is through the lack of tournaments and weddings. They're hoping to move them further into the year when restrictions ease, or in the worst-case scenario, reschedule them for next year. However, the large interest so far in booking tee times and playing golf is helping to alleviate some of those losses. "It's definitely a safe and great activity outdoors and I think people are craving that right now. They want to have social interactions again but they want to be safe. The word I've gotten from the owners of the golf courses is that golfers are being cautious and really following the rules. Nobody is saying a word or getting upset about the continued restrictions. Nobody wants a second wave. It's all been positive which is great. Nobody wants to be the course that isn't holding up to standards set out by the government and by my association, so they're all doing the extra work. It's great feedback we've heard," he says. John Puffer and Danny Jackson opened up the Bancroft Ridge Golf Course back in the summer of 2017. Danny Jackson says it's still too early to say what the overall financial impact will be on his course. "We forecast being about 50 per cent down from last year. The biggest impact will be golf tournaments, functions and events and weddings," he says. Changes to ensure everybody's health and safety have been made, and Jackson says they have signage up to support these initiatives. All bookings have to be made online or through the golf shop. Walk-ons are not allowed. Golfers can only show up 15 minutes prior to their tee time and if they arrive earlier, they have to wait in their car. They have a concierge outside greeting everyone and ensuring their tee time. The concierge provides rules of the day, reminds golfers about social distancing, directs them into the washrooms and golf shop in the clubhouse (only one person at a time) which is otherwise closed off and also directs players to the first tee to tee off. All golf carts and pull carts are thoroughly sanitized before and after use. They must be left in a designated area at the completion of the round. All rakes, ball washers and garbage cans have been removed from the course, and the on-course washroom is locked up and inaccessible. Touching the flag is forbidden and the cups have been raised for the ball to drop only half an inch. While the putting green is closed, the driving range is open. Guests can pick up a sanitized bucket and range token in the golf shop. All payments are debit and credit only. Jackson feels that golf provides a great outlet for many people. "As well as the social aspect, for some it is a part of their mental health therapy, for others a form of exercise. Golfers have been extremely cautious, respectful and most of all grateful for the opportunity to get out of the house and walk between three kilometres for nine holes and seven kilometres for 18 holes. We have also been blessed with some great weather," he says. A stalwart in the local golfing scene, the Bancroft Golf Course has been open since 1950. It is owned by Fraser Smith, and he says they've been open since the province allowed it on May 16. They probably would have opened a few days to a week earlier without the spectre of COVID-19, so Smith says there hasn't been too much negative economic impact on them. To prepare for the opening, they put a number of protocols in place to keep everybody safe. "First thing we did was close our clubhouse completely. We thought that would be the safest thing to do. We do everything through the window, like McDonald's drive thru, and if guests want drinks or anything like that, we can just serve it through the window. Another thing we did was allowing only one person per cart, unless they're from the same household, then it's two. We sanitize all the carts thoroughly. We have a staging area where we sanitize them and then bring them out for guests as needed. When they come back, they pull into a different area and we have staff sanitizing them again and prepping them for the next customer. It's a lot of procedural things and a lot of it is similar to what you see in stores and that sort of thing. And our staff are always washing their hands and using hand sanitizer and that sort of thing," he says. As far as the game of golf goes, Smith says they have raised the cups that the balls fall into on the greens one inch above the ground. The ball no longer goes into the hole anymore, it just hits the cup and counts the same as if it was hit into the cup. He says it keeps people

from touching the flag pole in the hole and from fishing their ball out of the cup, two contact points that could be sources of virus transmission. Sand trap rakes, any seating areas and ball washers have also been removed from the course to preclude the possibility of COVID-19 transmission. We've had a good response from the locals. Everybody's happy and the weather has been good. Everybody's been cooped up for several months now so to get out and get some fresh air and exercise, they're really happy. We've mostly seen local people, maybe a few cottagers, but mostly the locals. People are far more enthusiastic this year to get out on the golf course. I've noticed quite a few people that are new or would have golfed only a couple of times a year, and they've already golfed that many times over the past week. I don't think there's any other sport that's really open yet, other than golf. I've noticed a lot more families where the kids or spouse would usually be doing other sports or activities, but now they're going golfing together as a family. So that's a great thing to see, he says.