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## Golf Courses Take Laziness To New Extreme With GPS

If golf is supposed to be a test of the body as well as the mind, somebody forgot to tell Frank Rotundo.

At ChampionsGate Golf Club near Orlando, Fla., recently, eager staffers in headsets parked his car, cleaned his clubs and stacked his practice balls in a tidy pyramid. Now the course has GPS computers on its golf carts that do everything from giving shot advice to taking drink orders. Perfect, says Mr. Rotundo, who paid about \$80 for the round. "You don't have to lift a finger."

**Taking it easy:** Golf courses with the best amenities.

Just when you thought the venerable sport of golf couldn't possibly get any lazier, brace yourself. After three years of stagnant growth, golf courses from Baltimore to Las Vegas are taking coddling to an

unprecedented level. Massage anyone? One Colorado course gives \$25 rubdowns on the clubhouse porch. Lousy with your sand wedge? A club in South Carolina just removed a bunch of its most annoying bunkers. And why waste time looking for that ball you shanked into the desert when a special cart caddie at the Lost Canyons Golf Club near Los Angeles will chase it down for you? "We want our courses to be player-friendly," says Ron Jackson, chief executive of the company that manages ChampionsGate.

Not all these tactics are new, but lazy golf is getting so pervasive that some courses will actually charge you extra to walk. And while nobody can measure the growth of cushiness, here's one sign: Fees at new public courses have jumped 26% in three years, with nearly a quarter charging \$75 and up a round, according to golf consultant **Sportometrics**. In today's climate, golfers who pay that much money expect a little pampering.



Gary Hallgren

No, this isn't exactly what the ancient Scots had in mind when they started playing the humbling game. And purists worry that all of this indulgence reinforces the notion that golf is a sport for fogeys. But golf executives say they have little choice. The industry is coming off a misguided building binge that's produced 1,400 new courses in three years, or more than one a day. Total increase in rounds played over that period? Negligible. In a crowded market like that, it pays to be nice.

Private country clubs, of course, have always tried to pamper members, but golfers were hard-pressed to find

any of these touches at courses open to the public. You walked, you hit into water hazards, and you were lucky to go home with a free divot tool. Now, a new breed of upscale courses like Bear's Best, with greens fees as high as \$235, are all too eager to suck up. Zipping around the course, attorney Chris Frederiksen's foursome was joined by a special forecaddie who cleans clubs, washes balls -- and, when she's not taking lunch orders, jogs behind the carts from hole to hole.

Moments after smacking his tee shot far left of the fairway, Mr. Frederiksen saw the golf industry's new philosophy at work: His forecaddie, Stephanie McCathren, sprinting up the treacherous slope to find his ball behind a rock. "She was like a coyote," he says.

## Golfing Online

But who needs a caddie-concierge when technology can do the job? At Thunderbirds Golf Club, a new course in Phoenix, all carts have the latest lazy gimmick, computers with Global Positioning Systems. Last year, about 350 new courses installed them, three times as many as the year before. The chief purpose is helping golfers navigate the course, but the system plays other crucial roles, too, like transmitting NBA scores. If you're chilly, push a button and a pro-shop attendant will arrive to sell you a sweatshirt. And if a giant photo of a hot dog pops up on your monitor just before the ninth hole, don't be alarmed: That's your cue to key in an advance order to the Thunderbirds' snack bar. "It's almost subliminal," says General Manager Brad Kirkman.

Along with the glut of new courses, much of this pampering is a product of golf's troubling dropout rate. According to the National Golf Foundation, about three million people take up the sport every year -- while a roughly equal number quit. In 2001, the number of rounds played in the U.S. actually dropped by 1%, according to Golf Datatech, a Florida consulting firm. So if you're a developer who just sank \$20 million into one of those new upscale courses, you have little choice but to charge high fees and offer lots of perks to justify them. "The upper end of the market is a little bit saturated," says Ruffin Beckwith of the World Golf Foundation.



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Besides, coddling can be lucrative. Those handy GPS systems have the hidden advantage of letting courses keep tabs on you; fall behind the pace and somebody in the clubhouse can shoot you a digital message to get moving. Leave the cart path and some models will start beeping like a car alarm until you return. One Michigan course says the system helped it save \$10,000 last year by cutting the number of rangers patrolling the course. Others say advance food orders boost per-player spending at the snack bar by 30% because people tend to get fewer

quickie hot dogs and more wraps and burgers. And then there's the novelty factor -- Lake Hills Golf Club in Billings, Mont., saw a 10% jump in business right after installing the system.

At the Broadmoor Golf Club in Colorado, recent "improvements" include moving bathrooms closer to the cart paths to save time and clipping the rough shorter. It even charges golfers an extra \$5 to \$15 to walk the course. And so far, it's working: Last year, the resort booked an extra 1,000 rounds and generated as much as \$200,000 in additional revenue. "Time is money," says head pro Mark Kelbel. Another innovation: For \$25, golfers can get an apres-golf massage on

the clubhouse porch. "It helps rush nutrients to sore muscles," says spa director Marguerite Lykes.

## Not Exactly Aerobics

Not surprisingly, this lethargic brand of golf isn't popular with everybody. "It's not exactly super aerobic," says accountant Tony Cherbak, a lapsed weekend duffer who says he's taken up surfing. Others say they're simply tired of being nudged along. "It's like going to a busy restaurant," says Kevin Dougherty of Canton, Ohio. "These places just want to churn you through as fast as possible." It's a sentiment that's been echoed by a growing chorus of golf officials and pros, who worry that high-priced, low-energy golf will turn off the next generation of players. The United States Golf Association has been crusading against "cartball" for years now and continues to publish a pamphlet on the virtues of walking.

There's enough of a backlash, in fact, that some savvy developers are building "walking only" courses and marketing them as novelties. At the recently opened Bandon Dunes Golf Resort, for instance, you can forget about renting a cart. A day on the links here is practically athletic, with a grueling seven-mile trek up steep hills and dunes along the Oregon Coast. After a round here, says general manager Hank Hickox, "you won't be going out to a nightclub."

Still, millions of players don't seem bothered by sedentary golf. In some places, carts have all but taken over: One study says more than 90% of golfers in South Florida use them exclusively. Inventors are indulging laziness, too, working on prototypes for robotic caddies that follow you around the course giving advice, can't-miss drivers the size of honeydew melons and even a mechanized cup that lifts your ball out of the hole.

As for Mr. Rotundo, he couldn't be happier with his first visit to ChampionsGate. Not only did the entire staff know his name (that's what the headsets are for), but his cart had fresh towels in the glove box and a cooler for cold drinks. When is the last time he carried his own bag? Not since he took off the shoulder strap a few months ago. "I don't miss the days of walking one bit," he says.

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## Golf Potatoes

Golf courses are trying to speed things up and boost the bottom line by taking some of the effort and frustration out of the game. Here are some upscale courses around the country and a few of the steps they're taking:

Course/Top Fee	Amenities	Comments
<b>ChampionsGate</b> <i>ChampionsGate, Fla.</i> \$125	Valet parking, practice balls stacked in pyramids, GPS systems on carts, drive-up bathrooms	Managers at this tourist course actually want you to shoot a good score. "I nearly hit three birdies in a row," says one duffer.
<b>Bear's Best</b> <i>Las Vegas</i> \$235	Forecaddies double as "personal concierges." Walking costs \$40 extra	Bring money: Greens fees don't include \$25 forecaddie tip per player. Need a ride home? Casino limos idle in the parking lot.
<b>The Broadmoor Golf Club</b>	Shorter rough, bathrooms moved closer to cart paths, \$25	Course has managed to squeeze in 1,000 extra rounds a year. Says the head pro: "Is it an incredible

<i>Colorado Springs, Colo.</i> \$160*	massages at the clubhouse	aerobic experience? No, probably not."
<b>Turtle Point</b> <i>Kiawah Island, S.C.</i> \$179	Fewer bunkers, bigger greens, army of valets	Am I getting better? No. A recent renovation made this Jack Nicklaus course "easier for the typical resort player," says a spokesman.
<b>Thunderbirds Golf Club</b> <i>Phoenix</i> \$138	GPS computers, carts within a few feet of bag drop, all teeboxes within 20 yards of a cart path \$4.50	Thunderdogs can be ordered electronically. Chilly? Pro shop staff will come out and sell you a sweatshirt.
<b>Lost Canyons Golf Club</b> <i>Simi Valley, Calif.</i> \$120	Staff opens clubhouse doors for you. Forecaddies carry range-finding binoculars, run behind carts	Course decided to allow walking without caddies, but beware: Slow down and they'll send a cart out and make you drive it. Says golf director Jay Colliatie: "We take a white-glove approach to service."

*\*Does not include room charge*

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