TRUMP!
FLASHING THE GREEN(S) WITH THE DONALD

THE BUSINE$$ OF VEGAS GOLF

Perfect 10 at Rio Secco

In the Clubhouse: adidas, Fisker's 700 hp rocket and Playboy's Victoria Fuller
Ike Vegas is internationally known for its nightlife, stage productions, world-class dining and high-end retailing, the city has also emerged as a top destination for those ready to take advantage of the championship-name designer golf courses that blanket the region.

"The National Golf Foundation did a five-year study that revealed golf is a $62 billion industry in the U.S., and is actually larger than the motion picture and sound-recording industries," says Christopher Cain, director of UNLV's PGA Professional Golf Management program, which prepares students for high-level management positions at golf properties, whether it be the head golf professional, director of golf or general manager. "It's safe to say Nevada is growing dramatically in the area of golf and is also doing a really good job of incorporating other revenue streams tied into the golf experience. Take a look at Las Vegas, and somebody will be staying at a hotel and enjoying great food and wine and entertainment and making golf part of their experience."

Eric Dutt, who has been active in the golf industry since the early 1970s, is now vice president of golf operations in Vegas for Harrah's Entertainment. His responsibilities include overseeing the 18-hole Rio Secco Golf Club as well as Cascata, both of which were designed by Ron Jones. Dutt says golf courses in Vegas generate significant construction costs, largely because of the price of land and water. "For instance, I was involved in Redlands Golf Club, which opened in 1990, and we built that golf course for about $13 million and that was a very frugal budget compared to some other courses built in the last 10 or 12 years," Dutt says. "Cascata's original expenditure was in the $50 million to $60 million range. It costs a lot of money to build golf courses in Las Vegas, so you have some of the highest-priced courses ever built here in the Valley."

Of course, in maintaining its status as among the best venues for golf in the U.S., it requires dedicated professionals committed to the pursuit of fairway perfection as well as tremendous resources to keep each hole in top-notch condition.

Tom Vold, general manager of golf operations for Tuscan Golf Club, says his facility has 46 employees, about 30 of them part-time. "We have the golf course superintendent who oversees actual product, course service attendants, golf shop staff, food and beverage, cart people, sales and marketing, human resources and the café," he says, adding there about 50,000 rounds played annually at the public facility. "We are also specialized in that we have numerous customer-care people."

He says maintenance operations fluctuate depending upon the time of the year. "There is a lot of baby-sitting going on in December, January and February, when there is not a lot of growth with grasses, so there is more attention to detail making sure we produce the best product," Vold says. "Then in April, May and June, the primary responsibility is cutting the grass. It ebbs and flows just like your front yard."

He says golf course budgets vary, although a typical facility will allocate $1.5 million to $2 million annually for maintenance. "It's not black and white, and some facilities will have larger maintenance budgets," Vold says.

On par with Vold's estimation, Rick Friedemann, superintendent of Las Vegas Country Club—a private facility, which features an 18-hole championship course as well as two pitching and chipping greens and a 9,000-square-foot putting green—says the facility's annual maintenance budget approaches $2 million, which includes everything from the maintenance personnel to water to fertilizers and chemicals.

"We have 31 full-time maintenance personnel and four temporary positions, and it's a wonderful, experienced crew," Friedemann says, adding that the assistant superintendent has been with the club for 15 years, the irrigator for 20 years, the course foreman for 20 years and the senior equipment operator for 20 years. "We have a sprayer technician who does nothing but spray pesticides and chemicals and fertilizers, and a mechanic who maintains all of the equipment, a full complement that includes eight walking green mowers, two fairway mowers, seven rough mowers, ...
two bunker rakes, three tractors and all the aerification equipment." He says the greens and tees are mowed every day to every other day and the fairways and roughs twice a week, with regular sand top-dressing and light sand applications. The greens are the most aggressively maintained turf since that’s where golfers putt. The objective is to provide a firm, smooth and consistent surface. In order to provide turf that is dense and high quality, regular fertilizer applications are made based on soil tests to keep the grass healthy. In addition, chemical applications are applied as needed to control insects, diseases and weeds.

He estimates it requires roughly 45,000 man hours per year to maintain the course, which has about 450,000 rounds played annually. "We spend a lot of money and lot of time to provide the best possible conditions for our membership," Friedman says.

David Bogue, general manager of Angel Park and The Legacy Golf Club, also says it requires significant equipment and manpower to keep the course in picturesque playing shape—Angel Park perhaps more so, because the facility features two 18-hole courses, an 18-hole natural grass putting course and a 12 hole par 3 course, whereas Legacy has 18 holes. "At Angel Park we have so many courses to maintain, so we have five mowers to mow the roughs and fairways and greens areas, then you have a couple of specialty mowers to mow your trees and greens, and probably half-a-dozen weed eaters for around the bunkers and edges of the cart paths and force lines and trees," Bogue says, adding that both courses are managed by OB Sports Golf Management, which also manages Atlanta Golf Club.

Bogue’s Angel Park has 215 employees, about 30 percent of whom are part-time, with 50 employees on the maintenance staff. "I think what drives the success of our course is the dedication of the employees who work for us," Bogue says. "They take a lot of pride in what they do, and it shows."

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—ANGEL PARK’S DAVID BOGUE

Because of its size, Angel Park also has a larger-than-usual budget, he says. "To keep it perfect, the maintenance budget of Angel Park is not so many supporting factors," he says. "Our maintenance budget is the money we spend on equipment and labor to maintain the equipment, the payroll for maintenance staff and all the chemicals needed in the regular repair and the mowing and maintaining. Overseeding for the winter season each year is one of the biggest expenses, and we close the course for two weeks in September."

He says the two 18-hole courses average about 112,000 rounds played per year total, while the par-3 course has about 40,000 annually. Legacy has about 50,000 rounds played.

One of the oldest golf courses in the Valley, Las Vegas National Golf Club—which opened in 1961—features 18 holes and 18 full-time maintenance employees, according to Blake Roberts, general manager of the facility, who estimates it requires some 200 man hours per week to maintain the course. "We have people who just trim bushes all day and rake sand bunkers and move the roughs and greens and tee and fairways," Roberts says. "We have probably three greens mowers, two fairway mowers, two rough units, two tee mowers and two trap rakes. We use them regularly, and in the winter, they are used daily."

"The biggest issue for us is the weather," Roberts says, adding that the course is open year-round and is maintained to ensure the best possible conditions for golfers. "It’s a tough business, but it’s probably close to every month."

Lake Las Vegas Resort has three golf courses, the 18-hole, daily-fee, Jack Nicklaus-designed Reflection Bay and the 18-hole, daily-fee, Tom Weiskopf-designed The Falls. Lake Las Vegas also features SouthShore Golf Club, a private course also designed by Nicklaus.

"With golf maintenance, operations, food and beverage, I would say we average between 50 and 60 employees—full-time, part-time and seasonal—and I would say the dedicated manpower hours for one hole would be 5,000 to 5,500 per year," says John Herndon, director of golf operations for Lake Las Vegas Resort.

He went on to say that because the resort can be viewed as a destination within a destination, it relies more heavily on tourist play than some other Valley facilities. "We feel more of the tourist side at Lake Las Vegas, and we are not as much locals-driven because we have our own hotel," he says. "Close to 50 percent of our rounds come from tourists so we’ve seen nice, steady growth. Our courses are understanding the golf business more and more, and that there is a need there to support their customers as well. But Las Vegas has added nice championship golf courses that have really put it on the map as a top-10 golf destination in the country and it’s continuing to grow. It’s never really thought about it, but golf in Las Vegas probably is a billion-dollar industry when you look at the numbers."

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LAS VEGAS HAS ADDED NICE CHAMPIONSHIP GOLF COURSES THAT HAVE REALLY PUT IT ON THE MAP AS A TOP-10 GOLF DESTINATION IN THE COUNTRY.

LAKE LAS VEGAS’ JOHN HERndon

and it certainly has become a primary amenity and one we market Las Vegas around as a destination.”

Ensuring Vegas remains a top spot for golf enthusiasts requires dedicated individuals to oversee and maintain golf courses, to teach the sport, and to promote the industry in general.

That’s where UNLV’s PGM program comes in.

The two- and a half-year program, which includes a required 18-month internship, was launched five years ago and graduated its first class of five students this year. Two were placed as assistant golf professionals at local properties, two went to a private country club in Utah and the fifth is working with the PGA.

“The students enter the program with a passion for the game and a passion for the business, and they leave the program understanding the golf industry and how to be successful in their career path,” says program director Cain, a member of the PGA who has been involved with the UNLV program for three years. “By the time they are out of the program, they will have worked at private, public and resort facilities, and not only receive PGA membership but also a bachelor of science in recreation.”

Cain says the PGA has partnered with 81 universities for the PGM program.

“The PGA does a great job of preparing individuals for golf the profession,” he says. “The education process is very stringent and competitive and what the PGA has done is taken their curriculum and offered it to select universities, so students are very experienced and well-versed and ready to jump right in. They are prepared for challenges in the industry, such as the increase in golf course closures and decrease in openings.”

Cain went on to say that the industry seems to be flattening. In 2001, nearly 300 golf courses opened in the U.S., he says, while that figure plummeted to 26 in 2003. He credits this in part to Baby Boomers who are working longer and not retiring to the level. He also noted that every development plan a factor—if a course is not thriving, developers build it and build homes.

Dundas says a local golf course construction boom occurred in the 1990s, but has slowed for several reasons. “The cost of land escalated tremendously and the scarcity of larger parcels became fewer and fewer, so the courses being built were predominantly very high-end resort courses or were tied to real estate development,” he says, “so the cost of getting into the golf business in this town kept going up and up. I don’t think you’ll see any golf courses built within the Valley proper— they will be on the outskirts of town. And, of course, water is a large expense here.”

Given that Vegas is located in the Southwest desert, Veld adds water is indeed a very hot issue for the local golf courses. “The city is in a drought and we do use water not only for yards, but also for the irrigation of golf and, although that depends on the style of the golf course and its design and layout, but you do have 365 days a year you can play golf, and it makes the operation of the facility that much more expensive with the price of land, golf course maintenance and water.”

Bogey agreed that water is among the greatest expenses for a golf course, and Friedemann of Las Vegas Country Club says the facility uses some 200 million gallons of water annually. “But we have our own wells and water rights; we don’t pull out of Lake Mead,” he says. “We’re fortunate we don’t overspread the course in the winter, so we probably only use six- to eight feet of water annually. In the winter you can water every week or two weeks, but in the summer it’s every day or every other day.”

In addition to being a massive local industry in and of itself, Bogey says golf course construction also benefits the Southern Nevada economy in general.

“There is golf in every community but look at what it does to the economy,” he says, adding that a significant amount of business is conducted on golf courses, and many professional relationships are solidified on the fairways. “It also contributes to the employment base and tax dollars. If you have a piece of land that would have had 2,000,000 homes on it and you put in a golf course, you’ll be building multi-million-dollar homes on the course, so the tax benefits and costs derived from golf have an awful lot to the economic base and just makes a lot of sense.”

Next issue: From calls to hotels to real estate to restaurants, golf in Vegas has a wide impact on and off the golf courses.