Golf course managers need to take a swing at creating an enjoyable experience for golfers with disabilities.

By Ted Eleftheriou

According to the American Community Survey (ACS) conducted in 2003 by the U.S. Census Bureau, there are about 77 million Americans with disabilities. Consequently, there are 26.2 million golfers who account for about 9 percent of the total U.S. population. If the golf industry could adapt 9 percent of the 77 million individuals with disabilities into the game of golf, the total would amount to almost 7 million people. To accomplish this, golf facilities must identify and address the challenges that individuals with disabilities face.

On July 26, 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law. It established guidelines that prohibited discrimination against individuals with disabilities in the areas of employment, public services and transportation, public accommodations, and telecommunication services. Summarizing several key points addressed:

- **Title I**—Specifically deals with employment guidelines pertaining to discrimination against individuals.
- **Title II**—Establishes guidelines that prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities by state or local governments. Golf facilities owned by municipalities should become familiar with this section.
- **Title III**—Bans discrimination against individuals with disabilities in the access of goods, services and in the use and enjoyment of facilities where the public is invited. Privately owned golf facilities that do not allow public play may still need to comply with this segment if their facilities are open to the public for weddings, receptions, spectacles, non-member outings, etc.

The first step in attracting and retaining golfers with disabilities is to accommodate their desire to play golf by making facilities easily accessible.

**The Parking Lot**—For individuals needing the assistance of a mobility device such as a wheelchair, scooter or crutches, bringing golf clubs and equipment onto the facility often presents additional challenges. By offering accessible parking spaces close to the “Bag Drop” area, golf shop, locker room or practice facility, individuals who use mobility devices will have the convenience of having to only make one stop.

Lonny Zimmerman, superintendent of Adaptive Recreation for Las Vegas, Nev., adds, “Many golf courses do not allow golf cars in the parking lot. As a result, golfers with disabilities have to enter facilities using their wheelchairs. The challenge then becomes finding a safe location to store the wheelchair [which can cost as much as $5,000] while they play golf.”

**The Golf Shop**—Golfers with disabilities only become “handicapped” when obstacles and space constraints prevent accessibility. Zimmerman states, “Golf shops should have aisles that are 36 inches-wide allowing access to all merchandise, and displays should be low enough so that an individual using a wheelchair can access the top shelf. This prevents the necessity of having to ask for help to get a product. The height of the front counter should also be taken into consideration, building it low enough to allow individuals in wheelchairs to conduct transactions on it. Golf facility owners, operators and staff need to be sensitive to the challenges that individuals with disabilities face.”

**The Practice Facility**—“There needs to be a realization in the golf industry that many individuals with disabilities cannot physically play 18 holes of golf,” says celebrity trick shot artist Dennis Walters. “But that’s not to say that they cannot enjoy golf. Playing a full round of golf may be tough, but many golfers with disabilities enjoy hitting golf balls at the practice facility, followed by a couple holes of golf.”

An accident 30 years ago left Walters paralyzed from the waist down. “I found there were a lot of things I couldn’t do, but there was no way I was going to give up playing golf.” Through hard work and perseverance, Walters achieved his dream of playing, and now inspires and encourages others to reach for their dreams. With his partner and pal Super Dog, Benji Hogan—which
Walters calls, "the touring pro from the Miami Dog Pound"—they travel around the world entertaining and inspiring audiences with a display of golf mastery and trick shots.

"From where I started, there was no method for individuals with disabilities to play golf," Walters says. Among his many pioneering accomplishments, he was the first to attach a swivel seat to a golf car allowing him to recreate a natural golf swing. "If golf course operators really want to make golf accessible for everyone, they need to look for opportunities. For example, installing removable swivel seats at driving range stalls would allow individuals in wheelchairs the opportunity to slide onto these seats to hit balls. When not in use, the seats can be removed allowing others to use the stalls. Walters adds, "Individuals in wheelchairs have difficulties just getting out of bed. If an individual goes to hit balls, makes the effort to get out his wheelchair, but then has a difficult time accessing and using the driving range, he will be discouraged from trying it a second time."

Tees and Greens—Accessing tee boxes and putting greens can also present challenges. One solution is making at least two tee boxes per hole accessible by a single rider golf car. Putting greens should also provide easy, well-defined, accessible entrances for golfers needing the assistance of a mobility device.

The Golf Course—Golf courses can alleviate additional challenges by providing continuous golf car paths within the boundaries of the golf course. Paths should be a minimum of 48 inches wide, ideally linking all amenities (parking lot, golf shop, practice facility, golf course, etc.) for ease of access and maneuverability.

In addition, eliminating or providing openings in curbs, 60 inches wide and every 50 yards, would provide single rider golf cars accessibility to fairways.

"The quickest, most cost-effective way for a golf course to become ADA-compliant is by having single-rider golf cars available on their facilities," says Tom Durbin, vice president of sales for SoloRider, a manufacturer of single-rider golf cars, "This is because of their ability to maneuver over various types of terrain. Furthermore, golf course operators and greens superintendents needn't be afraid that these vehicles will damage greens. Each tire applies about 7.5 pounds per square inch to the green; about half of what a person standing on a green creates."

Durbin continues, "When I visit facilities I am amazed at how many operators keep their single-rider golf cars hidden in the cart barn, taking them out only when there is a request for them. The problem with that is that the guests don't even know that the facility has them. My advice to them is to put the single-rider golf cars in circulation—let guests know that they are available and offer them to seniors. Hiding them in the cart barn translates to missed revenue."

Indoor golf simulators can offer a creative alternative for individuals with disabilities by creating a realistic golf experience. Facilities equipped with golf simulators provide golfers with disabilities the opportunity to play famous golf courses from around the world, practice their game, take lessons, or get club fitted—all in the comfort of an easily accessible and controllable environment. "We have one in our recreation center," says Zimmerman. "Among the many benefits, is the ability to offer indoor golf lessons for adults and juniors with disabilities."

The University of Utah's Orthopedics Center recently installed a golf simulator for use in rehabilitation. It is also used to test and teach Project GAIN (Golf: Accessible and Inclusive Networks) participants. Project GAIN is a venture of the National Alliance for Accessible Golf designed to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities into the fabric of their community through participation in the game of golf. Project GAIN Utah received an award from the Utah Recreation and Parks Association for its outstanding accomplishments in 2004.

In addition to making facilities accessible to golfers with disabilities, facilities need to be aware of the way they are servicing these guests. Conducting facility audits and reviewing the services offered may reveal missed opportunities. For example, does the facility include phones with teletypewriter (TTY) technology for the hearing impaired? Does the facility have severe weather warning system offer visual warnings in addition to audio warnings for the hearing impaired? Do facility rules allow "non-playing coaches" to accompany golfers who are blind without having to pay a fee? Does the staff use person-first terminology when addressing individuals with disabilities?

Increasing awareness and educating staff will create a user-friendly environment for golfers with disabilities and able-bodied golfers alike. Walters concludes, "Golf facilities have to make it as easy as possible if they want to appeal to this market. Individuals with disabilities have money and want to spend it, but not on an experience that is too difficult."

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