

# Golf leagues benefit players, courses

BY MIKE TERRELL

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Golf leagues are a common fixture on northern Michigan links. Some have been around for as long as 40 years.

Judy Arnold, who moved to the Traverse City area in 1965, started playing in a Newcomers' League at Elmbrook in 1966.

"We've been here about as long as the course," she said. "There's a bunch of us that started here originally almost 40 years ago that still play regularly together."

Hundreds of golfers every week play in local leagues at area golf courses. It's a popular way for many players to set aside time for a weekly game of golf when they might not otherwise.

"I really enjoy playing golf, but if I don't play in a league, I probably won't set the time aside," said John Kennedy, a local golfer who plays in a Tuesday night league at Mistwood. "You get busy, don't play and your game suffers. This way, I stay on top of my game."

Leagues also provide big business at some area courses.

"It amounts to around 10 percent of our revenue when the leagues are playing," said Mistwood golf pro Greg Gay. "We have 12 leagues that play here, and they help fill in the mid-week late afternoon slot. That's normally a slower time for us, and we have 27 holes to fill. There's normally nine holes open for public play as well."

It's typical for a golf course to give league players a break on green fees, but they more than make up for the discount in other ways, said Gay.

"Most of our league play-



Record-Eagle/Lara Neel

**Scott Carroll plays with the Interlochen Golf League, one of the oldest in the Grand Traverse area. The league plays every Tuesday night, rain or shine.**

ers will share the cost of a golf cart, and after they are finished playing, they spend some money on food and beverage. It's a good trade-off for us," he said.

League play is vital to the smaller stand-alone suburban golf courses like Elmbrook, Interlochen and The Crown Golf Club. It can represent up to a quarter of their business on a mid-week summer day.

At The Crown, golf director Dave Taberski calls leagues, "a necessary foundation."

"We start each year knowing we can count on so many players with our leagues, and they will be out here even on cool, cloudy days when a lot of resort play slows down," he said.

"That's money in the bank at the start of the season." It's business golf courses can count on at the start of the season and all season long, Interlochen Golf Course owner Tony Kochevar said.

"Leagues can account for up to 25 percent of our play in a season," he said. "The

golf business in general has been on the downslide the last four years with fewer visitors to our area. League play helps fill that void."

Leagues appear to fit into the mix of play found in the region. A shift in public preference for a nine-hole round versus the more traditional 18 holes is helping golf courses manage the balance between leagues and public play, according to both Putman and Taberski.

"We've seen the shift taking place over the last few years," said Putman. "Today, nine-hole rounds account for a little over 60 percent of our play at Elmbrook, and that's all rounds, not just league play."

Both agreed the shift could be a combination of cost and time. The cost of a round has risen dramatically over the last decade, and golf, which can take four to five hours to play 18 holes, has increased competition from less time consuming outdoor activities.

"People still want to play, and nine holes allows them

the time to get in a quick game in just a couple of hours," Putman said. "They still have the rest of the day for other activities, and it allows us to integrate mid-week public and league play without much problem."

The resorts with their lodging and package plans are still predominantly 18-hole play, said Robert Todd, Grand Traverse Resort & Spa head golf pro.

"Most of our rounds are 18-hole rounds, and we've had a good year despite the weather," he said. "We have a couple of leagues for our members only, and they tee off after 5 p.m. They don't bump up against our resort play at all, and it's done as a courtesy to our members."

Crystal Mountain offers a similar situation, said golf pro Jeff Chapel.

"We have a couple of leagues, but they are made up of mostly local people," he said. "It doesn't interfere with our resort play, and allows the local people a slot to play on a regular basis."

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