

FAIRWAYS UNDER FIRE

Are little-used public golf courses worth the space?



Larry Schmidt

When four golf courses proved to be too many for New Orleans' City Park, one was converted into the 50-acre Big Lake area, offering residents a boardwalk and trail system.

By Peter Harnik and Ryan Donabue

The unforgiving waves of the Pacific Ocean have not been kind to the golf course in San Francisco's Sharp Park. Of its 18 original holes, designed by renowned architect Alistair MacKenzie, only 11 remain. The rest fell victim to a winter storm in 1938. Though renewed with a seawall three years later, the course is today still subjected to annual inundations that render it unplayable for months.

Sharp Park's erosion at the hands of unstoppable forces is an apt allegory for the state of golf today. The waves, however, have been social and economic, and even courses far from the ocean have been battered. Through a surprising misalignment of supply and demand, the decade of the 2000s was characterized by the frenzied construction of golf course communities coupled with a leveling off of participation. As a result, many golf operations are competing over a limited number of customers, and cities are trying to figure out what to do with courses

that no longer turn a profit or even cover costs. San Francisco's debate over investing \$11 million in another seawall for Sharp Park is emblematic: What is the future of golf in crowded, park-hungry cities?

Urban public golf courses are already parks—in a sense. They're green and beautiful, and the ecological processes of their trees, shrubs, and lawns help clean the air, slow the raindrops, and shelter wildlife. But for most humans, they have barriers that are as real as a sand trap. Unlike other parks, golf courses require entry fees (\$36 is the national median weekend fee at municipal courses), expensive equipment, and a working knowledge of a complicated game. And though they represent large properties—typically between 100 and 150 acres—they are almost invariably off-limits to the public.

“Continuing to invest in golf courses that are not financially self-sustaining at the cost of other urban recreation

is completely unjustifiable,” says Meredith Thomas, the director of San Francisco’s Neighborhood Parks Council. In cities with tight budgets and little open space—San Francisco is the second-most densely populated big city in the country—parks are expected to serve multiple demands in small spaces. Golf courses, in contrast, says Thomas, are “pretty much the definition of sprawl as far as parkland goes,” especially since “other forms of recreation like field sports and off-leash dog areas are bursting at the seams.” Underutilized and unsustainable golf courses, she concludes, “are counter to San Francisco’s definition of livability.”

Marcel Wilson, ASLA, who teaches a graduate studio in landscape architecture at the University of California at Berkeley, agrees. He has tasked his students with developing designs for San Francisco’s Lincoln Park Golf Course that allow for full public use and also include a profit-generating feature to replace lost golf revenue. Among the proposals that emerged are urban farms, bamboo forests, green cemeteries, aquifer recharge facilities, abalone farms, and municipal-scale composting facilities.

At the other end of the state, both geographically and economically, impoverished National City has also begun to question the role of golf in its park system. A crowded, polluted city south of San Diego, National City has only three public parks that provide a mere two acres for every 1,000 residents (compared with 6.2 in Los Angeles and 36.3 in San Diego). Yet in the center of the city lies a 44-acre golf course whose clientele is made up almost entirely of out-of-towners, according to a 2009 audit. Even though the city earns about \$84,000 a year from the facility, the need for parkland is so dire that it is considering turning it into a park with a soccer field, a restored creek, a community farm, a dog park, and paths for walking and cycling.

City Park in New Orleans formerly held an astonishing four 18-hole golf courses covering 520 acres. But there came a time when “the economics did not justify that many” says Bob Becker, the chief executive officer of the park, “and there was considerable demand for other kinds of recreation.” The imbalance was part of the inspiration for a 2005 master plan, finalized only months before Hurricane Katrina hit, that recommended eliminating two of the facilities, retaining only one of the internal lakes. After the hurricane, when the outpouring of support arrived, the master plan was instrumental

Fairways to Freezeways

In the Twin Cities, some snowbirds may head south each winter, but that by no means puts the golf courses into hibernation. When the blizzards come, the park departments of Minneapolis and St. Paul rev up their snowmobiles, hitch on grooming equipment, and hit the courses to carve out some exceptional urban cross-country ski trails.

For the price of a single round of golf, skiers can purchase a season pass for any metro area trail, six of which are on golf courses. In Minneapolis, Theodore Wirth Park boasts 25 kilometers of trails plus facilities for snowshoeing, tubing, snowboarding, and sledding. Half the trails are on the golf course, including a two-kilometer lighted section with snowmaking equipment. In St. Paul, Como Park golf course grooms trails for both classical and skate-style skiing. A lighted section stays open until 11:00 p.m., and a warming chalet offers equipment rentals and instruction.



Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board
Theodore Wirth Park, Minneapolis.

in allowing the park to immediately direct donors and volunteers to priority projects. One, spearheaded by The Trust for Public Land (TPL), was the \$2.5 million renovation of 50-acre Big Lake.

Today only a few vestiges of the land’s past remain, although “we still find golf balls from time to time,” says Larry Schmidt, the director of the TPL’s local office. Once the regrading of greens and bunkers was complete, the Big Lake area was packed full of amenities. There is a boardwalk, a dock, a meadow for concerts, and an interpretive nature trail that passes through five regions of Louisiana landscape, from upland hardwoods

to coastal grasslands and marshes. The next phase of the project will include the construction of a boathouse that is expected to generate revenue from both rentals and events. But Schmidt is particularly proud of the simplest feature, a one-mile walking and jogging trail, heavily used by a population for whom obesity and diabetes are prevalent.

The game of golf has never been an efficient use of space (hence the development of miniature golf), but in the past it could be argued that it was still a worthwhile public investment that subsidized a system's other parks through green fees. No longer. Golf's popularity is not keeping up with population growth nor with the explosion in the number of private golf venues; it's also losing out to other self-directed activities like running and cycling. In the late 1980s, the average course saw about 40,000 rounds a year; that number has fallen to about 33,000 today. A 2004 study of the recreation facility desires of San Francisco households found that golf ranked 16th out of 19 amenities; highest on the wish list were trails, pools, and community gardens.

The decline of public golf would be less taxing if courses were low-cost facilities. But many, predicated on the assumption of growing affluence and participation, were designed to compete with the private sector. They require a full-time staff, constant maintenance, and often a fleet of electric carts, a shop, and a restaurant. It is the triple combination of moribund rates of participation, high costs and sprawling land use that is putting the squeeze on public, urban golf courses.

Many golfers, of course, strenuously disagree. They point out that golf most certainly provides people with benefits, including exercise, competition, coordination, camaraderie, and spending time in beautiful surroundings. This is doubly true for seniors who might be unlikely to engage in higher-impact forms of exercise. Many public golf courses also offer youth programs that combine golf instruction with lessons in character development, such as the First Tee, a nationwide non-profit initiative with 200 chapters, or local initiatives like Bogey Bear in Seattle. Moreover, golf courses, while often criticized for excessive use of water and chemical fertilizers, do provide quantifiable environmental benefits by controlling stormwater runoff and providing habitat for a wide array of species.



Houston Parks and Recreation Department

Busy from before dawn to after dark, the Seymour Lieberman Exercise Trail in Houston's Memorial Park gets heavier use than the golf course it surrounds.

Golfers are also potent advocates for their cause—educated, articulate, and, frequently being older, able to take the time to go to public meetings and write letters. Efforts to eliminate public golf courses in cities often become pitched battles. In 2009 the spotlight shone on Sligo Creek golf course in a Montgomery County suburb of Washington, D.C., when the county revenue authority demanded that it become profitable or be closed. The proposed solution—installing a double-deck driving range surrounded by lights and netting—was shot down by neighbor outcry. But golfers responded to the threat with a strategic change of course and aggressive lobbying. Allying with a local nature organization, Friends of Sligo Creek, they pledged to make the facility more environmentally friendly and to enhance wildlife habitat. They reinstated a defunct First Tee program for minority youth, and offered to create something similar for wounded veterans. The rebranding campaign succeeded. The course still didn't earn a profit, but it gained community-wide acceptance as more of a multipurpose park.

In Houston, the popular Memorial Park golf course is surrounded by the even more popular Seymour Lieberman Exercise Trail. The three-mile path is “pretty much a landmark with runners in the region,” says Rick Dewees, ASLA, assistant director of park administration for Houston. With three million visits a year, Dewees says, “There are days when you can't imagine how you could get another person on it.”

The now-bustling track had a humble beginning. In the 1970s, when running was just becoming popular and the new Memorial Park neighborhood was a messy construction zone of development, runners gravitated to the

park. They eventually wore a rut in the grass, which the city filled with mulch. When the soggy mulch became a nuisance, the enterprising runners raised private money to replace it with decomposed granite. Later, the popularity was pushing use from before sunrise to after dark, and the runners again pooled resources to purchase lights, which the city installed. The success of the trail—along with the recognition that such amenities help attract a young, educated populace—has inspired the city to pursue a larger trail system, including a second, outer loop at the golf course. Though golfers are “pretty adamant” that runners stay off the fairways, Dewees says, the only real tension seems to occur at the parking lot, where the horde of runners makes it hard for cars to enter.

Seattle also supports getting more of the public into public golf courses, and the city’s recent master plan calls for a perimeter trail around each of the city’s four facilities. The city is also trying to open golf courses to nature lovers by working with Camp Long, an environmental learning center. One approach, which might be called “Birds Without Birdies,” is to allow birdwatchers to accompany veteran golfers as they make their rounds.

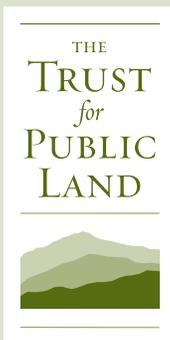
What about the danger of being felled by a golf ball? “Safety is a very critical issue,” says City Park’s Becker, who was forced by liability concerns to drop a planned bike trail between his two redesigned courses in New Orleans. “In this litigious society, you just never know.” Yet it is difficult to find cases of unsuspecting joggers injured by golf balls, despite the many golf courses situated in parks nationwide. (For head injuries, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, golfers rank 13th among 20 major sports—higher than lacrosse, but much lower than baseball, football, or cycling.) Perimeter trails, in particular, are relatively easy to design safely, using a combination of well-planned routing, natural

vegetation barriers, and small sections of fencing where needed.

Another option is to share the use of golf courses by day of week or time of day. Cart paths represent an outstanding built-in trail system, and could be opened for runners and walkers. In fact, the idea has an eminent precedent—St. Andrews in Scotland, hallowed ground for golfers everywhere, has traditionally opened up as a regular park for the townspeople on Sundays. Seattle is considering a similar concept as a way of hosting children’s programs outside of golfing hours.

Finally, just downsizing some courses from 18 holes to 12 or nine would open up a sizeable chunk of land for all kinds of other uses. Smaller facilities can be targeted toward novice players and those short on time. Indeed, one of the primary concerns of the golf industry is that its traditional demographic has less free time, and that the days of long, 18-hole excursions have succumbed to the pressures of modern life. No less a golf titan than Jack Nicklaus made this very point by suggesting in a 2007 *Golf* magazine interview that 12-hole courses make more sense in our hurried times. His remark created a stir, but since then, at least one course, near Toronto, has adopted the format and seen an increase in business.

A possible glimpse of the future may be found at the Washington Golf Course and Learning Center in Cleveland, of all places. A nine-hole course with an accompanying driving range, it was financed by the First Tee of Cleveland, is also certified by Audubon International as a Gold Signature Sanctuary, and has a collaborative relationship with the City of Cleveland, the Cleveland Municipal School District, and the Washington Park Horticultural Center. On any given day, high school students are out there learning turf management, animal care, greenhouse production, landscape mechanics, and floral design—all on a golf course.



The Trust for Public Land conserves land for people to enjoy as parks, gardens, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come.

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This article originally appeared in the June 2011 issue of *Landscape Architecture Magazine*. An excerpt appeared in the November/December 2011 issue of *Utne Reader*.

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