

THE VIRUS THAT MADE GOLF CONTAGIOUS

IN QUITE A SILVER-AND-GOLD LINING, THE POPULARITY OF OUR SPORT HAS SKYROCKETED DURING THE PANDEMIC

BY CRAIG DOLCH



A year ago, if you said you were going to play golf, you would likely get one of the following responses:

Again?

See you tonight.

Pick a real sport.

Not now.

You mention you're headed to a golf course, and the response might be:

Yeah, I played last week.

A bunch of us had a blast at Drive Shack.

Nice to find something healthy to do.

Blame this change on the coronavirus pandemic. More aptly, credit COVID-19 for actually helping golf.

It reminds me of Brad Faxon's clever line when he was asked about Tiger Woods' greatest impact on the sport.

"Tiger made the game cool," Faxon said. "When I played golf in high school, it was like I was in the chess club. It's not like that anymore."

COVID-19 might not have made the game cooler, but when the pandemic hit the U.S. in full force last March, it shined a light on one of the few sports that can be done with social distancing. The nature of the game – played in large spaces outdoors – allowed golf to be one of the few sports that had a chance against the pandemic.

While South Florida courses were hurt when they had to be shut down in the spring for more than six weeks, then

allowed to open with certain restrictions, the sport has rebounded better than Baker Mayfield.

Golf not only weathered COVID-19, it prospered from it. Golfers who hadn't played in years became reacquainted. Folks who had never played the sport gave it a try.

The Jupiter-based National Golf Foundation reported that rounds played in August in the U.S. increased by 20.6 percent over 2019. That's 10 million more rounds, the largest year-over-year increase in 20 years.

That's a lot of "fore!" and "that's a peach, hun," especially when golf's participation levels have been in a consistent decline.

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Things were even rosier in Florida, according to the report, where the Sunshine State had a 37 percent increase. Only Texas (39 percent) had a larger jump.

"We've had an opportunity to help old and new players get back into the game, and do so in a safe and responsible way," said PGA Teaching Professional Suzy Whaley, a Palm Beach Gardens resident who recently ended her two-year tenure as the first female president of the PGA of America. "That's what I'm most proud of."

It's not easy being a golf course operator in South Florida. You have developers who constantly want the remaining green land left in the state. You have droughts, hurricanes, tropical storms, bug infestation, environmentalists ...

But, believe it or not, COVID-19 actually was a financial boon to golf. Even with the added sanitation costs.

Good luck getting a tee time on Martin Luther King Day a few weeks ago. Tee sheets were fuller than John Daly's belly, and they continue to be.

The financial benefits aren't just on the course, either. Those extra rounds also fueled equipment sales, with Golf DataTech reporting retail sales increased by a robust 32 percent in August over a year ago. That's selling four clubs instead of three.

The golf industry also will be a major part of Florida's economic recovery this year as COVID-19 vaccines become more readily available. Again, not just on the course.

A recent story in *The Wall Street Journal* pointed out how most country

club communities in Florida are reporting record home sales because of COVID-19.

Folks from the Northeast and California – areas hit hardest by the pandemic – are flocking to Florida because they don't want to spend another winter cooped up because of COVID-19 concerns.

People realize if they can work from home, it might as well be in a warmer locale. Plus, gated communities provide a more controlled environment when it comes to dealing with a pandemic.

"We have seen a tremendous amount of interest in our Club since July," said John Jorritsma, the director of sales and marketing at The Club at Ibis in West Palm Beach.

"We're hearing from buyers that the appeal of having outdoor amenities like golf and tennis, coupled with the convenience of the Club services like take-out foot, is part of their motivation. It's led to our second-best year of home sales."

For so long, golf has been bemoaned as elitist, played by a bunch of rich, old guys who dress as if they lost a bet.

That has changed.

Golf doesn't seem like such a silly game now.

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**JOHN JORRITSMAS, DIRECTOR OF SALES AND MARKETING,
THE CLUB AT IBIS**

