

What the Golf World Needs Is More Courses Like This

BY ANTHONY PIOPPI

There is little disagreement that recreational golf is not what it once was. Few would counter that the game may never again reach the heights it did in the 1990s, when there were close to 400 courses being built every year and more than 500 million rounds played annually.

There are myriad reasons given for golf's decline, which is now about a decade long, including the "intimidation factor," a phrase that has entered the golf vernacular in the last few years.

It's possible the game is more intimidating than ever. There was a time when narrow fairways lined with gnarly 4-inch rough and greens rolling at 10 feet on the Stimpmeter were only found at the U.S. Open, not at the local municipal layout where people are expected to learn the game.

So thank goodness for Lyman Orchards Golf Center in Middlefield, Conn., which had its grand opening on June 16. The center's anchor is the Mark Mungeam-designed nine-hole Apple Nine Course that plays 1,556 yards from the back tee, 1,211 yards from the front and 1,380 yards from the middle. The layout has seven par-3s, two par-4s and a range basket full of good times; par is 29. There is also a chipping green, putting green and driving range wide enough to accommodate 40 players at a time.

During the opening ceremonies, a number of local politicians and dignitaries spoke, including Laura L. Francis, the first select-woman of the town of Durham, which borders Middlefield. Francis also talked honestly about how she and some of her friends had once been golfers.

"The barriers were there," she said of their reasons for giving up golf, "and intimidation was one of them. This is going to get us back in the game."



The greens have movement galore, enough to challenge the best of putters. But with slower green speeds the undulations can be handled and enjoyed by all levels of golfers.

Lyman Orchards also has two 18-hole layouts: the Jones Course, designed by Robert Trent Jones, and the Player Course, a Gary Player design. (This makes one wonder why the new nine is not called the Mungeam Course.)

The Jones layout is well liked by many local golfers — it can be difficult for the higher handicap. The Player layout is unequivocally unfriendly to the beginner and short hitters, precisely the kind of course that drove Francis and her friends to put away their clubs.

The Mungeam effort isn't a placid, bland layout with runway tees and boring greens as is found on so many par-3 or executive courses. He crafted nine holes that can be easily negotiated by beginners and high handicaps, but also enjoyed by accomplished players; each has three distinct teeing grounds. The greens have movement galore, enough to challenge the best of putters. But with slower

green speeds, the undulations can be handled and enjoyed by all levels of golfers. All the putting surfaces are open in front, and from the forward tees there are no forced carries. The light rough serves to stop wayward shots from running away more than to penalize miscues. The bunkers are shallow but artistic, not just holes in the ground.

From the back, there are three holes with moderate carries off the tee, and the par 4s — 301 yards and 314 yards — tempt one to go at it hard with a driver. For my money, they are the two best holes on the Lyman property, both offering up genuine risk-reward strategy.

Lyman Orchards President and CEO Steve Ciskowski told me the intent of the Mungeam layout isn't to draw golfers, but to be part of the family entertainment of the nearby Apple Barrel store with its pick-your-own fruits ripening throughout the year, corn maze and duck pond. I think he is going to be pleasantly surprised at who else shows up.

My friend Brett Zimmerman and I played nine that day. Eighty minutes after teeing it up on the first we walked off the ninth green sure we would return. Brett shot a 26 that included four birdies; it's the course record.

Mungeam's design isn't just a short course; it's an interesting and entertaining short course. I guarantee there will be a number of greens that will bring sheer delight to many golfers, such as when a putt roles the length of the modified Biarritz third, traversing the swale, or takes a wild swing in the Punchbowl sixth. There's nothing like them in the area.

Mungeam's layout is the kind of course that will show newcomers and lapsed players how much fun — yes, fun — and unintimidating golf can be. That can only be good for the game.

Pioppi, senior writer for Superintendent magazine, has been writing about golf course maintenance for more than 10 years. He can be reached at apioppi@earthlink.net.