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THIS WEEK'S ISSUE



April 21, 2008

GOLF 2008

Snow or shine, many stay prepared for winter reprieves

By JOEL HAMMOND

4:30 am, April 21, 2008

Six hundred golfers can't be wrong: There's something special about golfing in the snow.

The Strongsville Rotary Club's annual Chili Open, held Feb. 23 at the Cuyahoga County Fairgrounds, drew its usual big crowd thanks to a nice snowfall, and the club will again divide the majority of its revenue, about \$130,000, between 12 pre-selected charities.

While the event is laid-back — "the more snow the better," said public relations chairman Ken McEntee — it's an example of area golfers' need to golf 12 months out of the year and a ringing endorsement for area clubs' decisions to remain open to satisfy that need.

"It's good to swing the clubs; there's not a whole lot of golf you can play in February," McEntee said of the reasons he hears from golfers with snow-filled FootJoys, numb fingertips and rosy-red cheeks. "It helps loosen up the swing a little bit."

It's not the snow. ...

Where McEntee sees dollar signs for the Chili Open — a snowy February — club professionals, groundskeepers and bookkeepers see pain. Yet there's that occasional breakthrough, when Mother Nature offers a glimpse of what's to come from April through October.

"We had a Christmas a few years back when it was 65 degrees, and we did like \$3,000 that day," said Chad Gibson, director of golf at Cherokee Hills Golf Club in Valley City, west of Brunswick. "Is it nice every year? No, but there are unique times when it's beneficial to be open year-round. There are times when, if it's mild and there's no wind, you want to put shorts on and get out there."

And then there are other winters — like the one from which the region just escaped — when there are very few breaks, and they fall during the week. In those conditions, there's little upside to remaining open.

"We've had extremely limited play this year," said Chris Palmer, general manager at Mallard Creek Golf Club in Columbia Station. "Any amount of play we have during the winter is on holidays and weekends when it's decent and playable. But those two haven't aligned well."

"You get a little bit of business, but you're never going to break even. It's certainly not a good business decision."

While actual playing customers are few and far between in those instances, one ancillary benefit to remaining open is accessibility to customers looking ahead to the glory days — their June and July outings in 80-degree, sunny weather.

"We do 200 outings a year, and half of them are booked during the wintertime," Cherokee Hills' Gibson said. "Customers call me in January and February, and if we're not here, I'm certain they'd waste no time on moving on to the next course. In that regard alone, it's a must to be here."

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Whatever steps it requires, Canterbury Golf Club caddie master Mike Kiely said, it's important to have the course ready.

Temporary greens and tees are common, accommodating winter golfers while also saving those spots for the impending summer busy season.

"You have to be open," Kiely said, "in case someone needs to play. We have guys who haven't played in two weeks and are going to Florida that need to get out there. We put the temporary greens out there, put on the boots and sweatpants and go and walk."

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