

Another Look at Indoor Mini-Golf

By Peter F. Olesen, P.E.

Indoor miniature golf presents a challenge. The normal concepts for outdoor miniature golf don't really apply. In the first place, the desire of adults and teenagers to play indoor miniature golf is far less than it is for outdoor play. The high cost of space, lack of available space and the relative cost of construction usually dictate the use of a much smaller footprint. While there may always be an interest in including an indoor miniature golf course in an indoor family entertainment center (FEC), reality often cancels it out.

Most people that enjoy outdoor courses on a regular basis do not have the same motivation to visit indoor courses. The fresh air appeal of outdoor facilities is lost when you move the play indoors. As a result, many well designed indoor miniature golf ventures have failed, even in the southwest where daytime temperatures make outdoor play unappealing for much of the summer.

Most experts in the miniature golf industry agree that adults are far more likely to play outdoor courses than indoor courses. This is a combination of the assumption that people associate golf with the outdoors and the large number of indoor golf course failures around the country. A number of indoor FECs have reduced their 18-hole courses to 9-hole courses in order to place more productive attractions in the area formerly occupied the 9 fairways removed.

That said, there is a place in many facilities for smaller courses designed to attract to the under 12 crowd. The shorter attention spans lend themselves to lower par values as well as the shortened play of 9-hole courses. Not all indoor miniature golf course ventures have proven to be failures. Those individuals that recognized that lower budget courses, whether nine or eighteen hole configurations could be incorporated into solid birthday party packages, found that their efforts were justified. They identified their target market and created a venue that matched shorter attention spans with easier and shorter playing times. This enabled them to incorporate the resulting time spans into effective elements of successful birthday packages. The relatively high course capacity coupled with shorter playing times results in very attractive through-put figures for indoor miniature golf when considered against the smaller footprint.

Indoor facilities must be very aware of the limitations their available floor space places on them in terms of revenue per square foot. Space that does not contribute revenue must be kept at a minimum. By the same token, any attractions that do not demonstrate a positive contribution to the total revenues of the facility must be evaluated carefully for possible removal or renovation.

Indoor Miniature Golf Course Concepts that Work:

Black Light or Glow Golf has proven to work in certain markets. In some markets it has even proven to attract businessmen during their lunch hour breaks. Glow golf has proven to be a reasonable revenue generator in large indoor FEC and in the indoor elements of large waterpark/hotel combinations. That being said, there are other attractions that can meet the required through-put demand and time blocks with less space demands and lower or equal costs. The final decision should take into consideration the total mix of attractions and demographic demand, the balance of entertainment value and time commitments.

Design to Attract Younger Guests:

As the indoor course is far more likely to appeal to younger guests, the design in many facilities should concentrate on the younger players. As younger guests tend to have shorter attention spans, simplicity should be considered. This calls for fairways that are easy to play, with lower par values. One or two gimmick holes can stretch out the attention spans as well. Making the game easier and therefore quicker encourages younger players to play without frustration. Parents and older sibling can still gain a certain entertainment though possibly reduced entertainment value from these indoor facilities. A certain entertainment value will be derived from

observing the expressions of accomplishment on the faces of the young players. There are other attractions that can be incorporated into the mix that permit the younger guests and their older siblings and parents to participate together on other attractions that have been found to work across different age groups.

Birthday Party Packages Can Benefit from the Inclusion of Miniature Golf:

When establishing birthday party packages for family entertainment facilities the challenge is to create a perceived value for the parents. The inclusion of miniature golf provides a definable value that helps in the creation of a perceived price. The time required to play even nine holes of miniature golf is a package benefit by utilizing a significant portion of the birthday party timetable with an activity that has a strong perceived value, it allows operators to create packages that are both appealing and profitable.

Space Requirements:

Outdoor miniature golf courses normally range from 18 to 25,000 square feet, depending on existing topography and theming. This is far more space than most indoor facilities could afford to commit to miniature golf.

The high cost per square foot, whether it is new construction or leased space, makes every inch of space important in terms of return on investment. Every attraction within the facility must produce revenue that not only covers the cost of the space it occupies, but must also contribute to the common areas that are non revenue producing as well as to the outdoor parking area. This results in the need to compress a miniature golf course into as small an area as possible.

As the target market is much younger, indoor courses are smaller and more compact. Successful courses have been designed in relatively small areas. Nine-hole courses of less than 3,000 square feet have been incorporated into many indoor facilities. Current ADA Handicap Accessible criteria effectively control the minimum size of the courses being designed due to horizontal clearance specifications.

Theming:

Theming of indoor miniature golf courses ranges from pristine to spectacular, with glow golf designs being more likely recipients of extended theming. It is difficult to identify the financial benefits of expending large sums in the development of exotic themes for the smaller indoor courses.

Extensive and exotic theming has worked for outdoor tourism areas when one time visits are the norm. Some examples are the Orlando/Kissimmee Florida, Myrtle Beach and Wisconsin Dells markets. There aren't any comparable indoor markets for comparison. For typical community oriented facilities with the need to be supported by repeat guest visits, we feel that incorporating a play environment that is entertaining and can provide a shorter playing time (to allow more thru-put) is far more important than extensive theming.

Miniature golf courses have significant floor space and construction cost requirements. It is important that these requirements be weighed against the potential revenues.

The modern guest has higher expectations, thus rendering the old style basic carpet on the floor and wood bumpers type facility out of sync with current guest anticipations.

Designing for Maximum Through-Put:

The primary guest flow will consist of young players with short attention span. For a nine hole course 4 fairways should be par 1, 3 should be par 2 and 2 fairways should be par 3. The different par values should be spread around the course to avoid back-ups. If you anticipate an older market the par 1 holes should be reduced to 2 and the par 3 holes be increased to 4.

Adding fairways with more than par three values will increase play times and reduce through-put. This doesn't mean that there may not be markets where the anticipated volume of older players justifies increasing the average

par value and in some instance constructing 18-hole courses. Should you elect to do so and also anticipate a lot of birthday parties, our firm has developed course designs that enable the operator to accommodate two groups playing nine holes each at the same time with no conflicts.

Location:

Placement of the mini-golf course on the building floor plan should be such that it is visible from most locations in the facility. For most facilities I would suggest that it be located away from the entrance and the birthday party rooms to enable guests to move around the floor and become exposed to as many of the attractions and entertainment options available to them.

Options

Black Light – These courses can be designed as play oriented courses or as themed courses, depending on the concept chosen.

Double Header – A course concept developed by Entertainment Concepts, Inc. (formerly Peter F. Olesen and Associates, Inc.) that was originally developed for use in campground environments where construction budgets are severely limited in most circumstances. The concept includes a nine fairway course that is modified by creating nine new tee stubs connected at different points on the initial nine fairways. Circling around for the second nine results in different play on each fairway. It has also been incorporated into an indoor floor plan where space was limited and the intent was to offer 18-holes of miniature golf for adults and teens on a limited space commitment, while being used as a nine-hole course for birthday parties. It still only has the capacity of a nine-hole course.

Pre-Fabricated Miniature Golf Courses - There are several prefabricated miniature golf course products on the market. They are usually small in footprint, modular and are manufactured of various materials. These designs would be a valid consideration where multiple uses for the space are being considered and the course would have to be removed periodically.

Summary:

Teen age and adult guests are not nearly as inclined to play indoor miniature golf as they are to playing outdoors. The primary guest usage for most locations will be by children under ten years of age. Unfortunately this reality was not widely known years ago and many outstanding indoor miniature golf courses failed miserably.

Developers thought they could take an exceptionally successful outdoor operation indoors and transform it into an equally successful indoor attraction without taking the time to evaluate the market. In a few locations the concept did succeed, leading others to developing their own facilities on a similar template and going out of business.

In most markets there is a strong potential for another type of attraction to be far more successful within the same space or less and to be even less costly. Anyone seeking to determine which attraction will be more appropriate for their site, should carefully review the options available and talk to operators that have incorporated those attractions into their operations.

Any final decision should be the result of considering the relative benefits of including miniature golf against the inclusion of other attractions that could possibly result in a more cohesive and productive attraction mix.

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throughout the industry. The firm has performed more than 445 projects in 43 states, Angola, Brunei, Canada (Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec), Cuba (Guantanamo Bay), Kazakhstan, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam.. These projects span feasibility, concept development, master plans, final design and construction engineering. He is a member of the faculty of Foundations Entertainment University, has presented seminars at the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions, Fun Expo, Kart Expo and Leisure Expo as well presenting go-kart safety seminars for the State of Ohio. He has, and continues to write articles for industry magazines and internet newsletters. You can reach him at 847-561-7013, by e-mail at peteolesen@yahoo.com. To get more information on his experience and expertise check out his web site at www.fecdesigners.com.

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