

PLUSSES AND MINUSES FOR CONNECTICUT GOLF

By Bruce Berlet

The coronavirus has caused immeasurable hurt and harm in so many ways to all segments of society, and that certainly includes golf.

One of the few positives in Connecticut to come out of the horrific COVID-19 pandemic was increased money in the cash registers of many golf courses. Connecticut and Rhode Island were the only New England states to reopen early for golf, and Rhode Island allowed only players from the Ocean State to play within its boundaries.

So with new protocols such as social distancing, online payments only to keep players out of closed pro shops and one person in a cart to try to prevent the spread of the disease, many Connecticut courses enjoyed a financial bonanza, especially from players from Massachusetts, the last state in the nation to lift a ban on golf that lasted 45 days.

Golf was a cash-cow in parts of the Nutmeg State after March 25, when the office of David Lehman, commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development, announced courses could open under certain restrictions. While many Connecticut courses had an increase in golfers and revenue, Massachusetts courses lost millions of dollars.

Paul Banks, who has worked at the nine-hole Copper Hill Golf Club in East Granby for 26 years, the last 11 as owner, said things were “insane” immediately after his club opened. It included daily play of more than 200 rounds, nearly half by Massachusetts golfers.

“It’s something that I’d never seen before,” Banks said. “The phone rang off the hook and 50 percent of the calls were from Massachusetts. They couldn’t all get out, but at least 40 percent of them did. One time while I was talking to someone for 10 minutes, I could see we had got five calls from Massachusetts.”

Like at all courses, restaurants were closed except for takeout, but the Copper Hill golf business increased 20 percent despite no high school teams playing there this spring. And Banks had some interesting tales of how gung-ho golfers can be.

“People were trolling the Internet to get phone numbers (for courses),” Banks said. “We had two foursomes from Maine, and one guy from Cape Cod came all the way here but played only nine holes because it got too dark to keep going. But no one really complained because they were just happy to be able to get out there.”

Banks also got one especially intriguing call.

“Someone asked if we allowed out-of-state golfers,” Banks said. “I asked why he asked that, and he said because some friends from Massachusetts had gone to Rhode Island and got charged with a misdemeanor from the police because Rhode Island was allowing only players from Rhode Island.”

Despite the restrictions, Banks considered himself quite fortunate.

“I was glad to be on this side of things, but I felt really sorry for clubs five miles away in Massachusetts,” Banks said.

Stan McLennan is in his 32nd year as the pro at the nine-hole Suffield Country Club, which is also near the Massachusetts border. Suffield CC is a private course, but McLennan received plenty of inquirers from Bay State golfers.

“I can’t tell you how many calls that I took from Massachusetts,” he said. “They were dying to play, and I hated to have to tell them that we’re a private club.”

Still, McLennan said there were 1,159 rounds at the club in April, an increase of 20 percent, despite adverse weather much of the month.

“With no school, we were the only game in town as a youth activity and had a real family atmosphere,” McLennan said. “As the only member of the pro shop staff around, I didn’t miss a person who showed up, so it gave me an opportunity to really see what the actual numbers are.”

Todd Goodhue, the pro at Shennecossett Golf Course in Groton, was amazed with a 40 percent increase in players over three weeks in late April and early May. Most of the increase was from Massachusetts, but some players traveled from New York.

“We were jamming busy from the first tee time to the last tee time,” Goodhue said. “We had a lot of Boston traffic, and I went through the tee sheets every day and saw all kinds of exchanges from Massachusetts that we never saw before. And part of our clientele is the casino traffic, but with the casinos closed, it was strictly golf-driven traffic.

“We had to go through some hoops to stay open, like no carts because the Town of Groton said there were too many touch points, but I was just happy to be open. I feel sorry for clubs that had to stay closed.”

At the other end of the spectrum is Connecticut’s biggest sporting event, the Travelers Championship at TPC River Highlands in Cromwell on June 25-28. On April 16, the PGA Tour announced the first four tournaments after the restart of play on June 11 would be TV-only. Though it was a positive that the \$7.4 million tournament was going to be played barring more problems from the pandemic, it was difficult for one of the best-attended golf events in the world that annually attracts more than 200,000 fans would be played without spectators.

The tournament has raised more than \$42 million since it began in 1952 as the Insurance City Open at Wethersfield Country Club, including nearly \$20 million since Travelers became the title sponsor in 2007. That includes a record \$2.1 million last year, when the tournament had its best field since the insurance magnate elevated the event to unprecedented heights. But this year, officials have had to scramble to find new ways to raise money for more than 150 local charities because there wouldn’t be any corporate tents, ticket sales, concessions, pro-ams and other amenities.

Only players and other essential personnel will be allowed on the TPC premises, and the event will be televised on CBS and the Golf Channel. Tournament director Nathan Grube, the lead man in a monumental challenge to the championship team working to revamp the event safely, said a later date for the tournament was not among several options considered.

“This is a whole new version of the Travelers Championship,” Grube said three weeks before the scheduled final round. “We had to rebuild from the bottom up, and things kept changing every week. It was a strange time where we were planning about four different versions of the tournament. When you saw The Players Championship get canceled (on March 12), every tournament after it started going, ‘Oh, my gosh what if?’ And so we started working backwards from ‘What if we are canceled’ to a limited build, no build, fans, no fans, all these difference scenarios, and it was factoring into the timeline.”

Andy Bessette, Executive Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer at Travelers, called it “a unique world.”

“Everything feels so weird, so surreal,” Bessette said. “We draw hundreds of thousands of fans whom we love, it’s part of the ethos of who we are. Is it going to be strange? Yes, but given the lack of live sports right now, we’re fortunate, in a way, that golf isn’t played in an arena and we can abide by all the concerns of health and safety.”

“It will feel empty, but we’re going to proceed. We’re not sure we have all the answers as to how, but we’re going to figure it out. We’re going to work with social media events with a goal of making everything as good and entertaining as possible because the tournament is great for charity, it’s great for the community and it’s great for business.”

Officials held outside hope that fans could attend if COVID-19 diminished enough, but only players, caddies, tournament and club officials and a limited number of volunteers will be allowed. Players’ families and agents won’t even be allowed on the property.

“Golf lends itself to social distancing, but we had to plan on what things were going to be like during the tournament, like only 10 people in a group,” Grube said. “Everything is limited, and we’re counting every person on the property, even our staff, some of whom might not work every day.”

As of June 1, there had been no decision on how the media would be allowed to cover the tournament.

“It’s a subject the Tour has been looking at every closely,” Grube said. “We’re lucky to have had robust coverage through the years, but it will obviously have to be less this year.”

While Grube and his staff were in an evolving situation for months, they made a special effort to reach out to their charity partners.

“We’re committed to them and have always been creative, so we’re approaching this year with the same priority of getting as many charity dollars as possible,” Grube said. “The tournament is

a big commercial for the region, so we've looked at all options. We're excited sports is back and golf is in position where it can take place. People have said they understand the TV-only situation. It will be different, but we're embracing it. Everyone sees it as just blip on the radar."

Grube said there has been "an unbelievable response" from sponsors, and officials continue to work with the PGA Tour and State of Connecticut as the world tries to deal with COVID-19 that shut down most areas, forcing sports such as golf, the NBA, NHL and Major League Baseball to drastically change their schedules.

"There were a lot of efforts with Gov. (Ned) Lamont and the Center for Disease Control," Bessette said. "Safety is a priority where everyone feels comfortable, but this is the largest sporting event in Connecticut that is the pride of the state and we want to do everything possible to make it as successful as possible."

Grube and Bessette aren't sure what being the third event in the restart of PGA Tour will have on the field, but it could be helped that eight events were canceled or postponed until after the Travelers Championship. Early commitments included 2019 FedExCup champion Rory McIlroy, ranked No. 1 in the world, No. 3 Brooks Koepka, No. 4 Justin Thomas, No. T7 Patrick Cantlay, No. T7 Patrick Reed, No. 13 Bryson DeChambeau and Bubba Watson, who will try to tie Hall of Famer Billy Casper for most tournament wins (four). Chez Reavie is the defending champion after earning his first PGA Tour title in 11 years in 2019 with a four-stroke victory over Vermont native Keegan Bradley and Zach Sucher.

"Despite having a lot of different things thrown at us in the past, we've always had a good field," Grube said. "We don't know exactly what we're going to have this year, but we're already off to a good start. The players want to get back and play, and we've already got phone calls so we may have opportunities to get more good players who are looking for places to play because of the condensed schedule. They're still trying to figure it out, just like the rest of us, but I'm optimistic we'll have a great field."

The Tour's requirements include players, caddies and various tournament officials and employees being required to fill out health questionnaires and be sent pre-travel screening tests. They also will be required to take nasal swab/saliva tests upon arrival, likely at a designated hotel, followed by daily questionnaires and screenings.

"We're following all the rules," Bessette said. "We considered a limited number of fans, but conducting the tournament without crowds on-site is in the best interest of protecting everyone, including the Connecticut community at large."

Grube said the tournament explored virtual options for special events such as Women's Day with an eye toward creativity in a different business model with a different inventory.

"We have to make charities benefit and make sure we have financial stability that we can carry forward for the long term," Bessette said.

Bessette said a portion of this year's profits will go to the COVID-19 relief efforts. Fans interested in contributing to tournament charities can do so by visiting www.travelerschampionship.com. Those who purchased tickets through Ticketmaster will receive a full refund.

"We'll miss the energy that our fans bring to TPC River Highlands every year, but there's no doubt we will feel the players' excitement in our living rooms as we watch the tournament on CBS and the Golf Channel," Bessette said. "The Travelers Championship has a way of connecting us all, and we're focused on continuing to deliver a world-class event. Most importantly, the Travelers thanks everyone for their patience."

The Connecticut State Golf Association pushed all of its events forward by about six weeks with the first tournaments scheduled June 2. The only events lost as of early June were the six U.S. Golf Association qualifiers that the CSGA runs, but three major championships were moved: the Palmer Cup at CC of Waterbury from May 26-27 to Aug. 17-18, the Connecticut Women's Open at Rockrimmon CC in Stamford from June 15-16 to Aug. 26-27 and the Senior Match Play at Innis Arden GC in Greenwich from June 1-3 to Oct. 5-7. Five One-Day tournaments also were moved to later dates.

The Julius Boros Challenge Cup between teams from the CSGA and Connecticut Section PGA, scheduled for May 7 at New Haven CC, might not be played because of the challenge of trying to mesh the schedules of the two organizations and the club. And players on both teams have more commitments as the summer moves on.

"It has been an unusual year, to say the least," CSGA executive director Mike Moraghan said. "As you can imagine, the whole thing has been a juggling act, but fortunately all the clubs have been great to work with. Normally the schedule is finished well in advance, and we're running tournaments by April. But even now, we're still working on the schedule and trying to save every event. We've had to put time into coming up with procedures for conducting tournaments in every facet in ways that can keep people safe from the time a player arrives at the course until the time the player leaves the course.

"And it was a busy three months working with our lobbyist and the State of Connecticut, specifically the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD), first to keep golf courses open for play and then to assist golf course operations in understanding the Best Practices required by the State. All in all, we've been extremely busy but consider ourselves every fortunate given what so many people are going through."

The Connecticut Section PGA canceled five events, including its Spring Meeting and new Connecticut PGA Open, and moved four major tournaments: the Walt Lowell PGA Tournament at the GC of Avon from May 26 to July 27, the Hartford Women's Open at Goodwin GC and Keney Park GC in Hartford from June 8-9 to Aug. 22-23, the Charity Classic at Hartford GC from July 20 to Sept. 15 and the Connecticut PGA Championship at Wintonbury Hills GC in Bloomfield from May 18-19 to Sept. 21-22. The winner of the latter event is usually the Section qualifier for the Travelers Championship, but the PGA Tour said the 41 Section exemptions were eliminated this year.

The Section's first event is hosting qualifying for the Travelers Championship. The PGA Tour has made several changes for qualifying with the biggest impact being the reduction of open spots from four to two. On the positive side, 40 players, plus ties, from pre-qualifiers June 17 and 18 at Ellington Ridge CC advance to open qualifying at the same course on June 22. Only 25 players, plus ties, advanced the past two years. The number of players advancing from each pre-qualifier will be based on field size. All players must advance through the pre-qualifying stage unless they are granted an exemption to open qualifying due to their status with the PGA Tour or one of its affiliates. To register for any of the qualifiers, visit <https://ctpga.bluegolf.com/bluegolf/ctpga20/event/ctpga209/index.htm>.

"Our team worked very diligently to be responsible to our events and other events in the market place," Section executive director Tom Hankte said. "Players want to participate, but with the time frame being compressed, you don't want to overlap with each other, you try not to step on others' toes. Everything wasn't taken lightly, it was examined very carefully."

Dennis Dungee, the Section's Tournament Operations Director, had the unenviable task of trying to sort through all the scheduling problems and "persevere through uncharted times" while dealing with different rules in Connecticut and Massachusetts.

"When the pandemic reached 'stay-at-home' mode, the staff went from thinking about events to giving our best efforts to understand all the orders and restrictions in place so that we could keep the Section membership informed and up-to-date as possible regarding course operations," Dungee said. "The toughest part was, and really continues to be, that golf was able to continue, under heavy restrictions in Connecticut, but the courses in Western Massachusetts portion of the Section boundaries were ordered to close. So, as both states began the re-opening phases, we tried to be up-to-date and knowledgeable on two different sets of state orders and restrictions."

Dungee said the Section team realized early that the pandemic wasn't going away quickly so they started to work on what the changes to the season would look like right away. With clubs and courses having to reschedule their own events and outings, it was difficult to find a place on their calendars, but they were able to do so for major events.

"Obviously, with a limited window of time for competition this year, we will forego a few events," Dungee said. "But the positive side to that is sponsor/partner dollars have been taken from those events that we decided to cancel and moved to events we will operate so prize purse money will be high than years past in just about every event."

Dungee said the biggest part of the pandemic was the "unknown" such as when restrictions for no rakes, no touching flags, one rider per cart, etc., would be lifted.

"Many of our Section golf professionals in management roles are working more hours than ever due to limited staff," he said. "Many assistant/associate professionals weren't back to work (by June 1), which led to the question of who will have time to get away from the busy work schedule to play and if those not working would have the means to cover the financial commitment of entering an event when they aren't bringing in money."

“We certainly want to give the Section professionals the opportunity to play and did that in the most responsible manner. With that said, we were patient and knew when the time came we would all be together on the golf course again doing what golf professionals do, compete.”

The Connecticut Women’s Golf Association canceled five events and moved its championship at the Country Club of Farmington from June 9-12 to Aug. 3-4. The rescheduling resulted in a change of format so the tournament could be played over two days instead of four. There will be no qualifying round, with entrants seeded according to handicap in two flights of 16 players who will play two rounds each day.

The CWGA started the season with two unique events. They held their first two board meetings via Zoom and had a Virtual Better Ball Tournament (Net vs. Par) on May 26 and 27. There were 112 participants in six flights, and playing partners didn’t have to play together or on the same course. Four members still in Florida took part, and scorecards were submitted from 32 courses, 29 in Connecticut and three in the Sunshine State. Points were awarded for net scores in relation to par on each hole.

“We had a wonderful turnout for our first ever virtual golf event,” CWGA public relations director Carol Galbraith said. “We thank all of our members for participating in the fun competition and hope we will be able to golf together in the not-too-distant future. And special thanks to Michelle Murphy from Stonington Country Club who ran the event.”

The Southern New England Women’s Golf Association also postponed all of its events, starting with the Spring Meeting that was done via Zoom on May 30. The Invitational Championship will be July 14-15 at Richter Park GC in Danbury, the Memorial on Aug. 12 at The Tradition at Wallingford and the Open Team Championship on Sept. 13 at Keney Park GC.