



**SLOW
PLAY
AHEAD?**



In these tough economic times, people are watching where every dollar goes. So, exactly what does this mean for golf?

By Matt Beardmore



The condominium they have shared for nearly two years is just a pitching wedge away from a golf course in Hoffman Estates, a mere two-minute walk from applying the skills they learned from their grandfather with the perfect golfer's name: Pete Turf.

But unless they're paying a low rate, Nick Francois and Austin Soliz won't be taking aim on these perfectly manicured fairways and greens this summer. Because with the cost of fuel, food and consumer goods rising faster than Tiger Woods on a Sunday leaderboard, these cousins, just like the rest of America, are feeling the economic pinch.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Consumer Price Index for all food is expected to increase 4.5 to 5.5 percent this year, after rising 4 percent in

146 The number of golf courses in the U.S. that closed in 2006, marking the first year in six decades the number was higher than new openings (120).

8.6% According to data supplied to PGA Magazine, the increase in dollars spent on total sales of golf balls at on-course facilities in February 2008.

8.1% Change in net operating profit in fiscal year 2007, vs. 2006, for Fortune Brands, a publicly traded company that owns the Acushnet brand of golf products (Titleist, Foot-Joy, Pinnacle and Cobra).

-51.5% According to Golf Datatech, the number of rounds played in March 2008, vs. March 2007, in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin.

-9.9% According to the National Golf Foundation, the number of rounds played in the U.S. in March 2008, vs. March 2007.

-43.8% According to the National Golf Foundation, the number of rounds played in the lower Midwest region in March 2008, vs. March 2007.

"If I have to decide between playing golf or the kids going to some camp, then the kids go to some camp."

2007 for the highest annual increase in 17 years. For the week of May 26, Department of Energy figures reveal that the national average price of a gallon of regular grade gasoline rose 21 cents from just two weeks earlier, and almost 23 percent more than from the same period in 2007.

"Courses are more expensive here than where we're from," said Francois, 25, a former high school golfer from downstate Bloomington.

"The price of a round (in Chicago) is the same as last year, but the price of the round combined with the cart for 18 holes has gone up. It's just a couple bucks, but you can see it."

While not working as the head tennis professional at Schaumburg Tennis Plus, Soliz, 26, can be found each Thursday playing alongside Francois at what have become their regular stops, a course in Bartlett or one in Elgin, where they can escape the workweek grind with a round that won't burst their budget.

"We take our time," said Soliz, a Quad Cities native. "You're paying all that money."

To ensure they're getting the most distance out of their golf dollars, they search online every week for the best rates. But it's still not enough to whet their insatiable golf appetite.

"When we get off 18 we always want more, but we can't really afford it," Francois said.

Crystal Lake resident Sergio Castro, 35, is the owner of an Elgin-based commercial contracting company and a member

of Crystal Lake Country Club for the past 10 years. Although his budget allows him to spend more on golf and golf-related activities than many area players—several hundred dollars per month—Castro doesn't feel that current economic conditions are having much of an impact on a golfer's ability to hit the links.

"If you're going to pick and choose between golf and food, obviously you're going to take food," he said, "but I don't think the economy really affects golfing and playing a round of golf. Ten years ago, they were building golf courses like crazy. The overall saturation of golf courses makes rates very competitive."

According to the National Golf Foundation (NGF), the number of 18-hole equivalents in Cook and Lake counties is virtually unchanged over the last 10 years (a decrease of just 27 holes, from 155 to 153½).

"If you look hard enough, you can find a course that has a rate you can afford."

Prospect Heights resident Jim Moore has benefited from these low rates. Recently retired after 27 years with Anheuser-

Busch, he plays infrequently, but that's not to say he won't seek out the best prices when he can.

"I'm lucky in the sense that I'm a senior and a lot of courses have senior rates," said Moore, 70, who caddied at Tam O'Shanter Golf Course in Niles as a teenager.

He also enjoys living just steps off the seventh hole at the Rob Roy Golf Course, where often he'll spend evenings working on his short game.

Moore mentioned a number of courses he'd like to play, including Red Tail Golf Club in the Village of Lakewood, but said of the 30-mile drive west, "It's just not worth it with the gas prices right now."

While economics may prevent Moore from teeing off at certain courses, he can't imagine a scenario where dollars and cents would force him to stop playing entirely.

"I don't think so," Moore said. "I'll find a way to play. I'll give up a beer if I have to."

The NGF says the average cost of "public" golf (an in-season weekend green fee and cart) in the U.S. in 2008 is around \$50. Fees usually increase at newer facilities due to the fact that newer courses are more expensive to build.

For Vern Zeller, the choice to keep playing the game he loves is not as simple. Five years ago, the Carpentersville resident spent several hundred dollars playing three to four times per week, and last year he figures he spent \$70 or \$80 as he played every weekend. But with his discretionary income taking a hit with the current economic conditions, the 50-year-old father of two has had to reassess his golf priorities.

"Without a doubt, golf is my last option now," said Zeller, a golfer for 40 years.

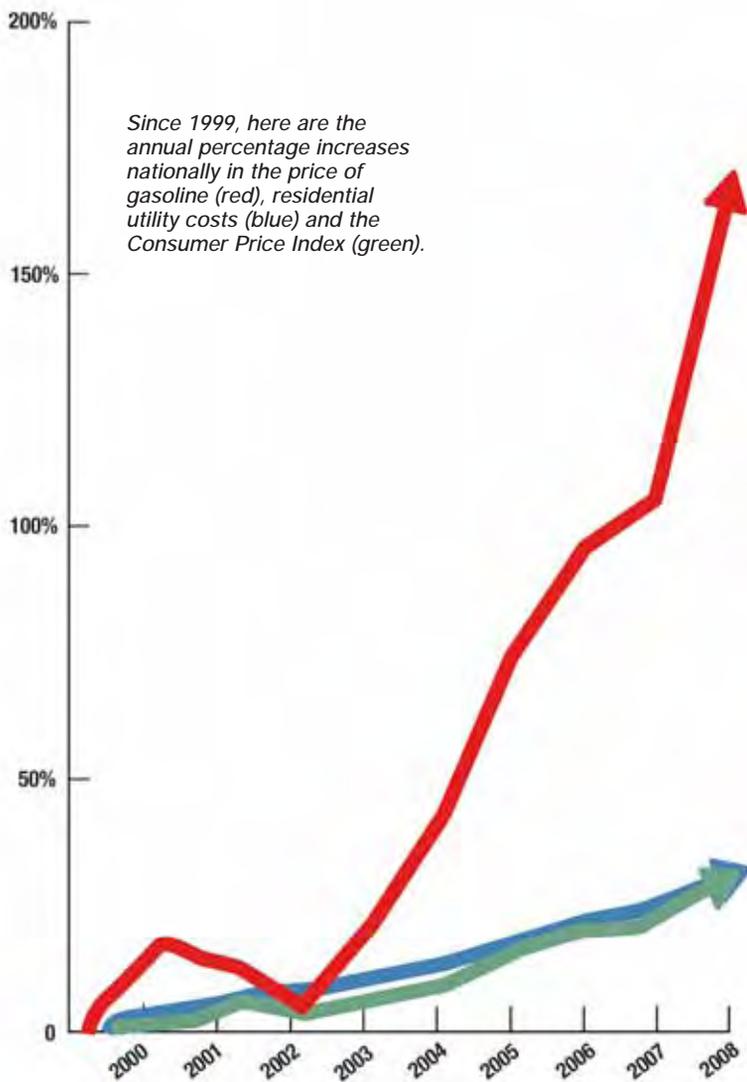
With his 13-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son participating in athletics, improving his golf score and meeting his buddies at the course every Sunday are the last things on his mind.

"The kids always come first," he said. "If I have to decide between playing golf or the kids going to some camp, then the kids go to some camp."

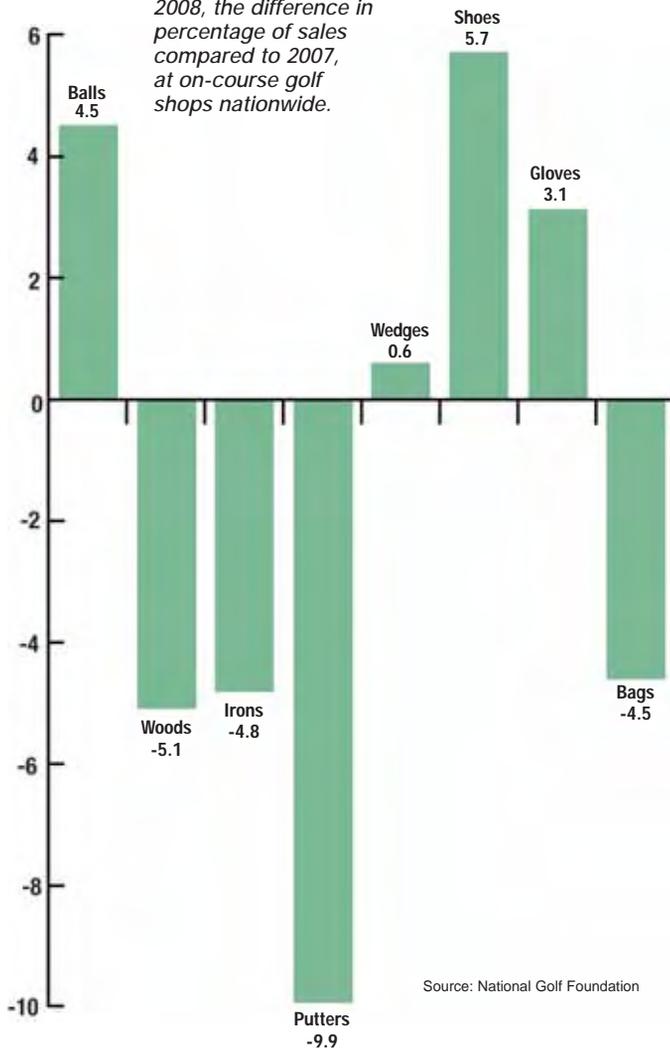
With school still in session in late May, Barrington High School girls golf coach Jodi Schoeck didn't have time to play as often as she would have liked. But that changes, and possibly where she elects to play, with summer vacation.

"I suspect that I'm going to look on the Internet for the best rates," said Schoeck, who led the Fillies to an eighth-place finish at last autumn's Class AA state tournament. "I usually get the mailing from local courses and I would sometimes look at it. Now, I'll probably look at it every single time."

For those interested in taking a day trip or enjoying a golf weekend, Lake Geneva remains a popular destination as it sits just 80 miles from downtown Chicago. But with many consumers already stretching their dollars thin, do these courses expect a decrease this summer in traffic from Chicago?



This chart shows, for the first three months of 2008, the difference in percentage of sales compared to 2007, at on-course golf shops nationwide.



"I think the Lake Geneva area may be affected a little bit less than some areas," said Chuck Dammeir, director of golf at Hawk's View Golf Club. "People that normally go to Galena or the (Wisconsin) Dells may go a little closer to home."

Leaving nothing to chance, Hawk's View is applying some aggressive online marketing campaign.

"We feel it is a lot easier to get an occasional golfer or a more frequent customer than it is to get more business," Dammeir said.

Another contributing factor that has impacted traffic at Hawk's View and Chicago-area courses has nothing to do with dollar signs.

"Make no doubt, the economy affects things, but at the present time it's more weather-related than economy-related," said Ken Buss, a professional at the Odyssey Country Club in Tinley Park. Bill Roper, manager of the Big Run Golf Club in Lockport, noticed a definite correlation

between the increase in the unseasonably cold and rainy spring days and the decrease in consumer spending.

"Coupled with the spring weather, there's definitely been a downturn (in traffic) this season and we're seeing people being a little more judicious with their spending," he said. "We've noticed a lot more people calling for prices before they commit to making a reservation."

Francois and Soliz will be among those hunting for the best deals, although it's unlikely they'll find the kind of bargain that Turf, a former employee at the Indian Bluff Golf Course near the Quad Cities, enjoyed.

"I remember getting up once at 5 in the morning and I'm like, 'Grandpa, why are we going so early?' Soliz recalled.

"He said, 'Just get in the car and let's go.'

"We'd leave so early because they wouldn't charge him to play."

In these often-difficult economic times, that would be a perfect round for Francois and Soliz; no matter what kind of score they shot. 🏌️

Matt Beardmore is a freelance writer from South Elgin.

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- 36 Hole low gross and low net championship
- 5 Handicap or lower compete at scratch
- 6 Handicap and above compete at full handicap
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