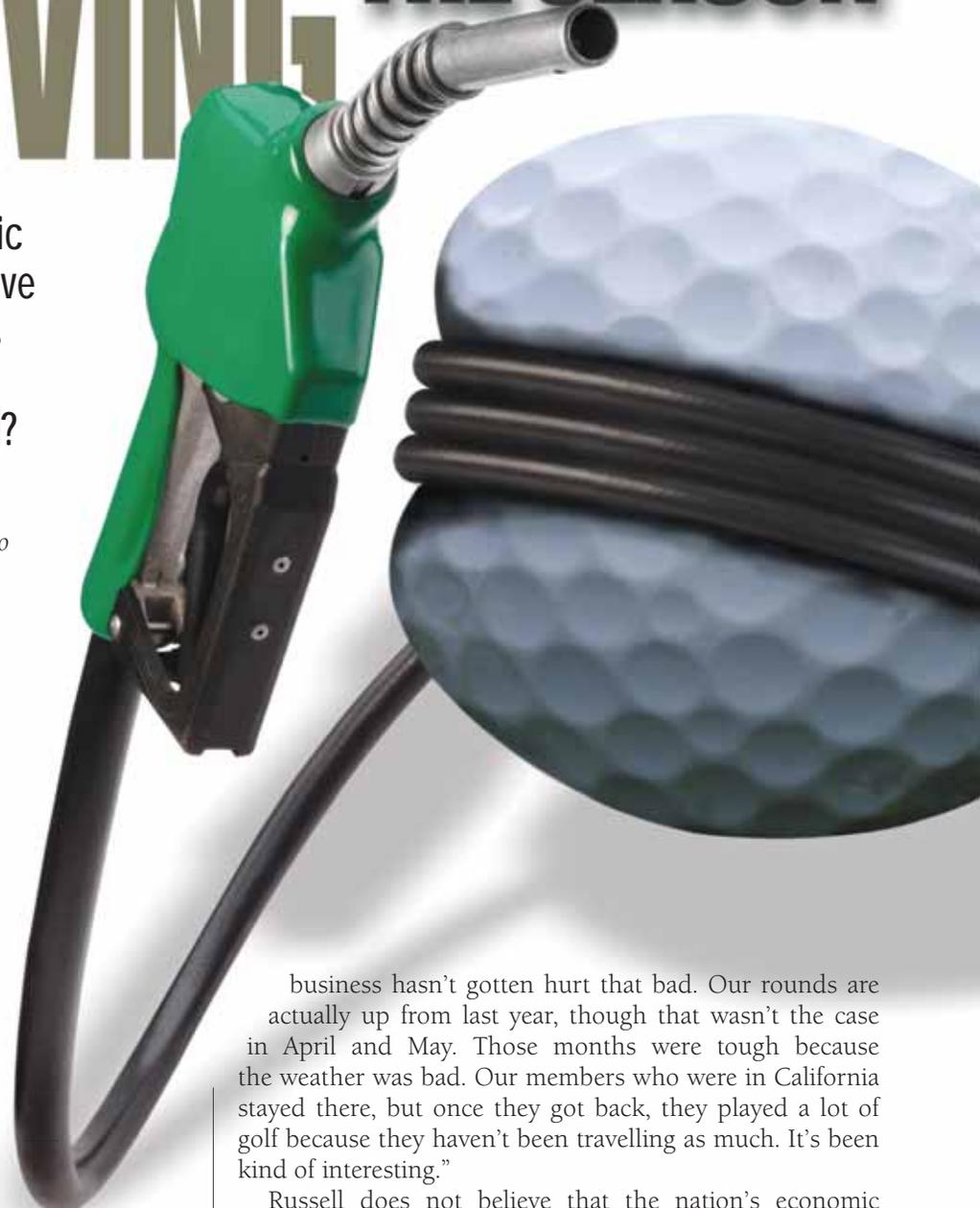


SURVIVING THE SEASON



Theoretically, the economic problems of 2008 would have had measureable effects on the golf industry. So, is that what happened?

Editor's note: The cover story in the July/August issue of *Chicago District Golfer* examined the state of the U.S. economy as it related to its potential impact on golf in the Chicago area. Now, with the 2008 playing season at an end, we have a chance to see how it all played out. *Chicago District Golfer* asked some of its regular contributors to provide their observations.

IPGA: At best, a minimal impact

Did the severely struggling economy negatively impact golf in Chicago? Not really, according to Terry Russell, the president of the Illinois Section of the Professional Golfers' Association.

"As far as gas prices and housing, the economy is in bad shape," said Russell, "but what I've found at my private club is that our members are staying close to home. They're not taking as many trips and spending all their time at the club. Our business has really been up."

Russell, the head professional at Bryn Mawr Country Club in Lincolnwood, Ill., admits that not all of Chicago's golf facilities are as fortunate.

"I know a lot of public courses have been hurting because we'd gotten a lot of weekends of rain," he said. "They get killed on rounds. They budget everything on so many rounds and are bottom-line oriented. They're for profit, and we're not-for-profit at a private club. Our end of the

business hasn't gotten hurt that bad. Our rounds are actually up from last year, though that wasn't the case in April and May. Those months were tough because the weather was bad. Our members who were in California stayed there, but once they got back, they played a lot of golf because they haven't been travelling as much. It's been kind of interesting."

Russell does not believe that the nation's economic problems had much of an impact on equipment sales, either.

"But there has been less equipment hoopla," he said. "Most companies have gone as far as they can (in promotional efforts), so there's not the big buzz and excitement out there about equipment. But we've still got people who need wedges and putters."

—Len Ziehm

No pickup after the bad weather

In a slumping economy, golf became one of the first budget cuts for families looking to battle rising fuel and food costs. Chicago District golf courses were hit hard early in the

year by poor weather, but then, as conditions improved, they didn't see a huge surge in play.

Courses hit hardest were located off major highways or away from densely populated areas and, as a result, many tried to come up with different ways to draw players. The Oak Club of Genoa reduced its senior and weekday fees, partly because of a renovation but also to draw more customers.

"They're not going to frequent it every day because it's off the beaten path a little bit, but they'll come back instead of twice a year, maybe five or six times a year," said head professional Darren Stanek. "I'm starting to see that with the seniors in the area and in the surrounding area."

Courses situated within residential areas, or just a short drive from surrounding cities, saw a bit of a recovery when the weather warmed. But starting times still were more readily available. For example, one could book back-to-back Sunday foursomes at George Dunne National in Oak Forest by calling mid-week, which is unusual.

One type of course that seemed generally unaffected by high fuel costs were high-end public facilities.

An employee at Bolingbrook Golf Club said that for its clientele, fuel costs seemed to be more of a nuisance than a deterrent.

"Most people live probably within a proximity that it wasn't too bad to drive over, but golf in general is five to six hours and time's valuable," said Cantigny Golf director of instruction Connie DeMattia. "Our clientele is a little bit different. If somebody's going to pay a 100 bucks to play a round out there, five, ten bucks . . . not that it doesn't matter, but we're not attracting the guy looking for the \$45 round."

—Jim Owczarski

Still healthy in Central Illinois

Cool summer temperatures and a relatively healthy local economy helped central Illinois golf courses weather the downturn that has adversely affected much of the golf industry, two administrators said.

"The weather has been good to us this year and the economy, around here, at least, has held its own," said Bill Woolard, who oversees a network of five municipal courses for the Peoria Park District. "Compared to the larger metropolitan areas, we're in relatively good shape."

A rainy spring and early summer led to a decrease in rounds over 2007 totals at the PPD courses, but a mild and dry August indicated this year's round count could be ahead of last year's total. PPD courses did 27,015 rounds in August, an increase of 3,439 from the same time a year ago.

The large gain helped nudge the year-to-date total 67 rounds ahead of 2007, having recorded 121,544 rounds before September.

Across the Illinois River in Pekin, the story was similar.

Pekin Park District, which operates the Lick Creek and Parkview courses, was up more than 800 rounds from last year. Specific numbers weren't available, but superintendent Steve Funk said his courses are doing better than expected in '08.

"(The economy) hasn't seemed to affect us too bad," Funk said. "We started out pretty slow, but once we got going it's been a good year."

—Greg Stewart

Trying to weather the storms

Even as the nation's economy was struggling, record rains across much of Wisconsin made for wet conditions early and then late. The pair of devastating multi-day rainstorms that passed through the region in early June and early September challenged superintendents at courses over a wide geographic area from central Wisconsin to Indiana. At the same time, course owners were forced to wonder whether the higher costs of gas and food would combine to hit them with a double whammy.

According to Ikhlas Ahmed, general manager of Eagle Ridge Resort in Galena, Ill., the wet weather of May and June probably hurt the golf business across much of the Midwest more so than did the economy.

"The combination of rain and resulting floods, combined with the entire country's financial issues, definitely had an impact especially early in the season," he said. Some groups from Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa who were scheduled to visit in June had to cancel or delay their visits because of flooding in their hometowns.

Happily, says Ahmed, once the flooding subsided, starting times at Eagle Ridge were at a premium and there was a noticeable uptick both in business and conditions. "August was great—up 12 percent over last year," he said. "And the rains in September only helped to make our golf conditions the best they've ever been."

According to Joe Vittengl, general manager of Devil's Head Resort in Merrimac near the Wisconsin Dells, the weaker economy actually might have served to increase travel to the area.

"Golf groups who might have driven to Myrtle Beach in other years seemed to stay closer to home this summer," he said. "While we lost some business in June due to the rains and flooding, we rebounded a few weeks afterward. We're all hoping that the rains stay away . . . so the season finishes with a bang."

—Neal Kotlarek

ILLUSTRATION BY DEVIN JOY