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ON THE RIGHT COURSE WHILE MANY AREA GOLF COURSES ARE STRUGGLING OR DYING, WILSON-RUN LOCATIONS ARE THRIVING.

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You don't have to look far to see the bloom is off the rose for many golf-course owners in the Twin Cities.

Countryview in Maplewood, Orchard Gardens in Burnsville, Brockway in Rosemount and Carriage Hills in Eagan are small operations that have given up the fight recently, selling out to developers. Tees and greens have been bulldozed to make room for homes and businesses.

And the trend shows no signs of stopping. The future of the Mendota Heights Par 3 Course is in the hands of the courts. Plans are for The Bridges at Mounds View to become part of the sprawling Medtronic office complex soon.

In the end, there simply are too many golf courses collecting too little revenue from too few players.

And yet, some courses are thriving.

Business is going like gangbusters at Gem Lake in White Bear Lake and Oak Glen and Applewood Hills in Stillwater, where the courses and clubhouses are bustling morning, noon and even into the night. All three courses did about 55,000 rounds each in 2004.

The common thread: They are owned and operated by the Wilson Golf Group, which has found a core following at each course, transforming happy customers into a healthy profit.

"We don't have any great secrets," said Greg Stang, director of operations at the Wilson Golf Group. "We put out a great product at golf courses that are in great condition, and we sell it at a fair price to the consumer. I don't know if everybody does that in our business."

Wilson Golf Group owns eight courses: three in the east metro, one in Mankato, two in western Wisconsin and two in Colorado.

Ken and Ruth Wilson of White Bear Lake, who own Wilson Tool in Hugo, got into the golf business in 1984 with the purchase of Gem Lake, an 18-hole, par-57 executive course. The operation was a success from the start, so they set their sights on expansion. They bought or built seven more courses between 1992 and 2000.

Stang, the PGA professional at Oak Glen from its opening in 1982 until 1993, has been running Wilson Golf Group since the Wilsons bought that course in 1994.

Each of the company's metro properties caters to a different type of clientele.

- Applewood Hills is especially popular with women and couples. More than 800 women play in six different weekly leagues at the scenic 18-hole, par-62 executive course. "A typical league might have 50 to 80 women in it," Stang said, "so that's a phenomenal number."
- Gem Lake is big with juniors, women and senior players. The junior program has 640 boys and girls, who have full run of the course most afternoons. The facility added carts two years ago to accommodate senior players who need assistance moving from tee to green.

- Oak Glen, a par-72, championship course, caters to more experienced golfers, and does big business in corporate outings and banquets. The course overflows with golfers every Monday and Tuesday, running triple shotgun starts with a women's league at 8 a.m., a corporate outing at 1 p.m. and a men's league at 6 p.m.

"A course has a fixed set of expenses whether people are playing or not," Stang said. "So, the key to profitability is doing whatever you can to have golfers out on your course."

Weekly leagues are a big part of the success, and they run every weekday morning and evening at each course.

"That's your steady business," Stang said. "Most of our leagues run for 17 weeks. We try to start them in mid- to late April and run them until mid-September. That guarantees people on your course."

It did Tuesday morning, when a thunderstorm swept through the metro area. The inclement weather stopped play at many courses; at Oak Glen, it merely delayed the fun for the 60 members of that morning's women's league, who waited in the clubhouse for the rain to stop. When it did, they filled the course like they do every week.

Faith Finn of Stillwater is a member at Indian Hills who also plays at Como and Sawmill. But you can find her every Tuesday at Oak Glen.

"This league is great. It's an 8 o'clock shotgun, so you know when you're going to play, and you know all the other women will be out here playing, too," she said. "They match you up with different people every week, which I like, and they're real friendly here to women."

"All the women stay for lunch after we play, and the food is great, which is important to us."

Most walk-up traffic at Wilson's three Twin Cities courses occurs early afternoons during the week or on weekends.

"Believe it or not, we're busier on Mondays and Tuesdays than we are on Saturdays and Sundays," Stang said.

Wilson Golf Group is branching into course management this year, offering its expertise to small operators looking to maximize their property's potential. And the company is always searching for new properties to purchase.

"I probably get calls about 100 golf courses per year that are on the market nationwide," Stang said. "I'll look at 10 or 20 per year to see if they are something we might be interested in. We could realistically buy a couple of properties a year, if we found the right ones."

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