



Golf guru, Web site aim to put R.I. on right course

By Katie Haughey, Staff Writer

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Photo by Brian McDonald
Dan Clawson, president of Little Rhody Golf Company, hopes his Web site spotlights the state's promising golf industry.

The Little Rhody Golf Company LLC is a comprehensive online resource for Ocean State golfers at www.rhodygolf.com, which was launched this month. The North Kingstown company, parent firm of rhodygolf.com, says the site will be a complete source of local golf information, including course and practice facility reviews and instruction tips from local professionals. In addition to providing instructional tips, the site includes "the business ring," which allows individuals and businesses to advertise their services.

PBN: How important is golf to the Rhode Island economy?

Clawson: I think it's very important. To give you an idea, I think the most recent year statistics that were gathered, \$26.1 billion was spent on golf travel nationally ... there are 26.2 million U.S. golfers. In the Northeast, there were 63.8 million rounds played. When you just look at the statistics, it's very important. And it's not just golf. It's all the merchandise that supports golf; it's the impact it has on the commerce of the region, and nationally, air travel. Then there are all the other ancillary things: golf school and

instruction.

PBN: Do businesspeople still use golf to network or woo clients?

Clawson: Yes. Golf is a really interesting endeavor in that people from various walks of life and various positions in the company can all interact around that similar thing. Golf is definitely a way to attract clients. In fact, one former partner I worked with a few years ago took their clients to Pebble Beach. A lot of times, lunch is only an hour or so. With golf, you're going to be spending five or six hours with a prospective client. It's definitely still being used today – it's a great way to make an impression on a client.

PBN: Is Rhode Island a golf destination?

Clawson: One of the visions I have for Rhode Island is to make it a golf destination. If you look at industry reports, the biggest states for golf are California, Arizona, Florida, North Carolina and South Carolina. One of my visions is and something I'm working on with my golf travel editor is to make Rhode Island a reverse golf destination. As you know, there's a heavy golf contingent in Rhode Island and lots of people here will travel to those states. But my vision is to bring people from those states here, especially in the summer months. I've been to almost 40 of the states, and I would argue that Rhode Island has some of the most beautiful land and scenery in the entire country. My perception is that Rhode Island isn't as much of a golf destination as it should be.

PBN: Is the fact that more and more courses are being built here every year diluting the market?

Clawson: Yes, I would say that the number of courses is being diluted. When you add that to the weather conditions, it creates a very difficult environment for golf courses and other facilities to be successful. And that's why you need to rely on smart methods to get your message out.

PBN: How big an effect does bad weather have on the golf industry?

Clawson: If you look at our region in the Northeast, according to the statistics I have, the number of rounds played was down 5.6 percent. We've experienced some of the wettest weather in recent history. So, yes, weather can have a major effect on the golf industry, and it's a trickledown effect. Not only are golf rounds affected, but merchandise sales are affected. You can't create more days, but I think where golf courses and clubs can get a positive effect is by leveraging good and smart marketing practices and technology and try to make the most of what days are left. Interestingly enough, in our area we have the Eagle Crest Golf Dome, an indoor driving range/golf facility. It's been around for about 67 years, and because the weather has been so poor for us for the past few months, their business has actually been positively affected over

the winter. It's basically the only facility available for people to go practice during the winter months.

PBN: How does a traditional golf facility make up for lost revenue due to bad weather?

Clawson: I think what it really comes down to is it's all about the number of days. So as you lose days, it's impossible to make up the days. So more aggressive marketing, more touting of specials and facilities (is a good idea). I can only surmise that the reason that so many clubs are adding things like banquet facilities is because they're trying to negate the weather anomalies. To combat loss of days or bad weather, good marketing practices can be a help. The one thing that could have a positive impact in a bad-weather season is to leverage your other assets, like banquet facilities and merchandise sales.

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