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2005 BEST NEW RANGE-2ND PLACE WINNER

From Tee Box to Tee Line

18-Hole Course Gives Way to Thriving Island View Golf Centre

By Mike Ashley

Island View Golf Centre is thinking outside the tee box. Saanichton, British Columbia's state-of-the-art golf practice facility was a modestly used par-3 18-hole course before morphing into a booming golf range and teaching center. The transformation has been so successful that Island View earned *Golf Range Times*' second-place award for Best New Range of 2005.

"I'm extremely proud of what we've put together," says General Manager Sean McNulty. "I think everyone that comes here for the first time has the same reaction, 'Wow, this place is really something.'"

McNulty's family, which co-owns Island View with Scott Brackenridge and his family, painstakingly carved the facility into the beautiful British Columbia countryside, building scenic gardens and stately brick and rock walkways and blending the picturesque clubhouse seamlessly into the surrounding wooded areas and open fields.

The front of the clubhouse, with its statuesque, three-story cedar beams, is just a hint of the craftsmanship apparent at the facility. Finer details also include the well-manicured greens and those striking walkways surrounded by burgeoning gardens of flowers and plants designed by landscaper Gerhard Relm.

"You get here every morning and you look outside, the way we're tied into the nature around us, and you feel good about where you work," says McNulty. "I can't imagine there's another range like it."

And that was part of the idea at Island View—to create a golf experience unlike any other on Vancouver Island. And it isn't just about nature. The McNultys and Brackenridges have nurtured the facility, providing an elegant double-deck tee line with 10 fully automated tees, putting and chipping greens and some of the best instruction anywhere north of the border.

McNulty emphasizes placing customer needs first, and to that end,



Island View, which opened in December 2004, will soon be expanding its pro shop, adding a fairway practice bunker and putting in a second pond.

The natural near-5,000-square-foot pond at the front of the facility is already a popular area for customers to relax and enjoy the view, sharing the space with more than 120 trout, several ducks, a turtle and an otter, among other flora and fauna.

"We've taken advantage of our surroundings," says McNulty. "The view here is amazing."

CREATING A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

So how does a par-3 golf course turn into a golf range? Well it helps if the owners also own development and construction companies. Scott Brackenridge, who owns Scotia Developments, sold a major interest in his course, Sunshine Hills Golf Course, to the McNultys, who own Five-Star Paving.

And while that meeting of assets opened the way to reshape the Sunshine Hills course into a range, there were still major physical and political hurdles to be cleared there on Vancouver Island, just outside British Columbia's capital city, Victoria.

It was the growing golf demographic in and around Victoria that originally inspired the McNultys' investment in 2002 and the subsequent two-year, \$3.5 million (Canadian dollars) conversion of the property.

"The golf course did get a fair amount of use but nothing compared to the customer traffic we get now," says McNulty. "And you could see that coming because there are so many avid golfers here. We have an older population, a lot of retirees, and it doesn't get too hot or too cold here. People are looking for something to do and golf is very popular."

McNulty estimates there are more than 50 golf courses on the island, but now with the addition of Island View, just two full-time practice facilities. The area was obviously underserved in that regard and the change at Island View was dramatic—more than 100,000 customers walked through the doors in the first year of operation.

But before the first golf-practicing patrons could enter those glass front doors, Island View owners had to move heaven and, literally, earth. Eleven thousand tons of fill dirt were moved to level what would become the Island View tee line, and shore up parts of the 350-yard-deep landing area.

Coordinating the logistics of the many trucks used to ferry the dirt was a major part of the challenge, but one Scotia Developments aided by Juno Construction handled well, says McNulty. Part of the charm of the facility, the soft, rolling undulations deep in the blended ryegrass field around what would become target greens were kept intact.

"We had to bring up the elevation of the land because one of the great things about our range is that there's not too big a drop in elevation [along the tee line]," McNulty says. "You get a true distance when you're practicing your shots and golfers appreciate that. It looks like you're hitting out on a golf course, not just a field."

To add to that feel, Island View is building a second pond with a fountain next to a target green 100 yards out on the left side. Just the presence of water in the landing area will make hitting there "more exciting," says McNulty.

That landing area already isn't very easy to maintain, even without a water hazard. Island View staff pick balls by hand off the target greens and by necessity, around some of those small hills near the targets. And when it rains—which it does quite often in the North American Northwest—the John Deere tractor stays in the garage and the whole landing area is handpicked.

McNulty keeps three part-time staffers on hand year-round just for that duty and in the summer, he has a full-time grass superintendent to keep the area green and growing. He says a mechanized picker won't touch the landing area from October until March, when the weather clears a bit.

"Going up and down on those hills out there tears up the grass," he says. "We want everything to look like a real golf course, so we take care of our grass the same way."

CHIPPING AROUND POLITICAL LANDMINES

While the topography presented a few obstacles, some of the biggest challenges to the change came on local political fronts. Though zoning on the 10-acre property allowed for a driving range, the Central Saanich Council opposed the new facility from the start. Council members were eventually overruled by the Agricultural Land Commission—the facility sits on agricultural property and is surrounded by farms—and that ultimately allowed the project to proceed.

"The municipality out here gave us a lot of difficulty," says McNulty. "That has definitely been our biggest problem and one we're still working on."

McNulty is still fighting a council demand that the facility offer three parking spaces for each of the 50 tee stalls. Island View has applied for a variance so that the front pond won't have to be filled to add unnecessary parking spaces at the entrance.

"Where did that idea come from?" McNulty asks. "Everywhere the standard [for parking space per tee stall] is 1-to-1. They're asking for 3-to-1. It's ludicrous to think that for every one person that comes to hit in a stall, he brings two buddies who also drive here."

McNulty has submitted videotape from his parking lot security camera to show that parking isn't a problem in the current 72-space lot. But that's just one part of the Central Saanich Council's influence at Island View. Rigid fire-safety requirements at the facility necessitated that sprinkler systems be installed under the tee line stairwell and underneath the clubhouse roof, adding approximately \$200,000 in construction costs, according to McNulty.

"It's really just common sense to me," he says. "Do you need all these extra sprinklers at a driving range where there are acres and acres of land to run out to if there's a fire?"

Another ordinance caused a problem because the facility had too much "usable space." As a result, 6-foot ceilings were installed in the basement of an adjacent house where McNulty lives. "I'm 6-4," he says. "And now I have to bend over to even get in the room. We'll do a variance application down the road and hopefully get this to a logical conclusion."

Since the facility opened there has been somewhat of a political backlash from a growing legion of devoted patrons. The incumbent mayor, the head of the council, was voted out of office by about 300 votes,

ironically, about the same number of names signed to a petition supporting the range's construction. Call it the "swing" vote.

McNulty says all he and other golf range owners can do is work the best way they can within the parameters set by local government. Sometimes changing political perceptions and outdated ordinances can be a slow process, he says. But a good product kept customers on Island View's side.

"A lot of people weren't happy with the way we were being treated," McNulty notes. "We lobbied the golf vote, I guess, and things do seem to be getting better."

SET UP FOR SENIORS

Craig McNulty, Sean's father, and Brackenridge designed the range with the help of Warner James Architects, relying a lot on common sense and catering to the older demographic they knew they'd draw. With so many golf courses in the region, the choice to go "high end" was an easy decision.

"We like to think of it as somewhere between a golf course and a driving range," says Sean McNulty. "And we're definitely leaning towards the golf course."

The emphasis on quality grass and the pristine targets and bunkers were important but the owners also wanted an impressive clubhouse design, and they got it. The grand front entrance has a sharply angled roof and huge 30-foot-tall cedar poles that draw the eye to the structure. The Canadian and British Columbia flags fly proudly overhead, lending a stately feel.

The walk from the parking lot is down a winding brick stairway that circles around the putting green and a large rock wall just outside the clubhouse entrance, an impressive display of manmade ingenuity using natural resources.

"The big thing was the entrance creating a sense that you're going into some place special," says McNulty. "We really went all out on that design and customers feel good about it. They enjoy coming here. They're smiling when they come in."

The tall clubhouse naturally gave way to a double-deck tee line, and that choice automatically had half the tees under cover, an important consideration to keep participation up even in precipitation. The Northwest is known for rain. By late January, for example, Saanichton had seen 26 consecutive days of showers.

The owners also added natural gas heaters to help keep business brisk in the off-season. The heaters are divided into eight sections on the lower level allowing McNulty to heat just portions of the tee line on slow days.

Ten of those tees also feature the Donalway AGT (Automatic Golf Tee) II system, a nod to the senior golfers who really benefit from not having to bend over to tee up balls. The automated stations have three different tee-height settings so customers can hit with woods or irons, and three stations are set up for left-handed players.

"The seniors love them," says McNulty of the automated tees. "We've had them right from the start because we thought they would work well with the demographics we have. It sets us apart, too, because no one

else around here has them."

The seniors also love Island Views' membership options. McNulty says the facility sells four or five memberships a day, even in the off-season. In the spring and summer, that number can climb as high as 20 memberships each day, sold at five different levels ranging in customer savings of 10 percent to 25 percent.

"It's been huge for us," he adds. "We have a ton of people out there with cards, and we get an awful lot of renewals. I think people like the choices we have. They can customize how many balls they want to hit and how much time they want to invest."

Younger players are another emphasis at Island View. Local schools bring children to the facility for lessons, and the facility is active in junior programs and special seminars such as the Future Links Program. Sponsored by the British Columbia Professional Golfers' Association (BC PGA), Future Links brought 80 children, ages 5 to 12, to Island View last July for a free day of fun and learning.

"It's a great program for introducing the kids to golf," says McNulty. "Golf is a great game for them, too. It teaches so many life lessons and they get a feel for the history and etiquette, something parents really appreciate. And it was all free."

TEACHING THE GAME AND LEARNING THE BUSINESS

Island View offers a full menu of lessons and teaching options, headed by Canadian PGA Pro Scott Keenlyside, the BC PGA Golf Professional of the Year in 1999. Andrew Wintraub, a CPGA pro since 2001, is also on staff and has worked under some of the top golf teachers in the country. Together, they are a formidable teaching duo for Island View.

The 1,200-square-foot pro shop inside the clubhouse—where customers purchase tokens for the Range Servant America dispenser—complements the instruction program by offering a good supply of clubs, shirts, gloves and balls, among other small items, mostly from Dunlop.

"I guess we think of this as being a blue-collar area," says McNulty. "And in golf that means John Daly and that means Dunlop. A lot of people identify with him."

The snack bar in the clubhouse offers a selection of chips, cookies and baked goods that customers can enjoy with their cup of java from the coffee bar (a requisite in the Northwest). Island View also can supply hot dogs when bigger groups come out in the summertime. McNulty hopes to add beer sales in the future, but applying for a liquor license is a political fight he's putting off a little longer.

There's another 1,200 square feet upstairs in the clubhouse, which is used right now for informal offices and storage. McNulty hopes to expand the pro shop and use that space as part of a much larger retail display someday.

As a new business owner, McNulty is learning on the job. The key, he says, is listening to customers, getting a feel for what changes they would like to see and plotting how that will affect the bottom line.

The biggest accomplishment Island View has been able to achieve since opening is cutting labor costs through smarter scheduling practices. Instead of keeping indoor and outdoor personnel on all day, McNulty staggers the hours to avoid overlap.

"Since we have a high ball capacity with our auto tee-ups and the hopper, we only need to pick once a day," he says. "We started cutting back on how many people we had here working at a time and we didn't lose anything in service or the aesthetics on the range. And we've saved a ton of money. Sometimes it's just trial and error. You have to see how things work."

And things are working pretty well at Island View these days.

Mike Ashley is a contributing writer for *Golf Range Times*.

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