

# EXPANSION OF GOLF COURSES IN THE UNITED STATES\*

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**ABSTRACT.** Twenty-five million Americans play golf on the nation's 16,000 courses each year. These golf courses constitute a significant national landscape feature. Since 1878, when the game arrived in the United States, golf has filtered down the urban, economic, and social hierarchies to become accepted by and accessible to most Americans. During the ensuing thirteen decades the number, location, and layout of the nation's golf courses have responded to many of the same driving forces that impacted the nation, including decentralization, growth of the middle class, war, economic depression, suburbanization, and the increasing role of the federal government. Four epochs of golf-course growth and diffusion show the growing acceptance of the sport and depict where courses were most likely to be constructed as a result of the prevailing forces of each epoch. *Keywords: diffusion, driving forces, golf, land use, recreation.*

Few sports leave an imprint on the land as large or distinctive as golf. Golf courses are highly visible from the air and are easily distinguishable in remotely sensed satellite imagery because of their large size, distinctive patterns, and normally bright green, irrigated grasslands. Golf is the eleventh most popular sport in the United States, and during the last quarter of the twentieth century the number of golfers increased four times faster than the nation's population, from 10 million to more than 25 million. These golfers played nearly 600 million rounds annually (U.S. Census Bureau 2002).

Golf courses are an important national land use. The nation's 16,000 golf courses occupy an area as large as the states of Delaware and Rhode Island combined (Santiago 2005). These golf courses represent a significant investment of public and private capital and land. Often, they are centerpieces of destination resorts and vacation areas and consequently have had impacts on vacation travel and retirement migration (R. L. A. Adams 1995).

Our objective in this article is to explore the changing geographical distribution of golf courses in the conterminous United States at the regional level using county data and to determine whether golf-course construction and distribution were influenced by some of the major socioeconomic driving forces of the twentieth century (Kates, Turner, and Clark 1990; Turner and Meyer 1994). In some ways, this study updates and expands on the work of Robert Adams and John Rooney (1985, 1995). We, however, focus more explicitly on golf courses as a significant land use that reflects the socioeconomic and environmental drivers of their construction epoch.

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\* We would like to thank Donald J. Berg, Lisa M. B. Harrington, and Luanne Napton, as well as the two anonymous reviewers and the editor who, through their substantive critiques, helped to improve this article. The U.S. Geological Survey provided a grant that was used to acquire the *Golf Magazine* database.

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