



Creative use of range space with mats to reduce wear and meaningful targets to improve aim and shot variety makes the practice area more effective and enjoyable.

Transforming the Driving Range Experience

Written by Marco China, Director of Turfgrass Operations, Deer Ridge Golf Club

Over the past decade, the concept of golf practice has shifted. Where once players aimed to fit in as many rounds as possible, today's golfers are increasingly turning to the driving range for frequent, focused practice sessions. This evolution has brought heightened expectations for the quality and conditioning of practice facilities. As a result, many golf clubs are rethinking how their driving ranges are set up, maintained, and integrated into the overall player experience.

At numerous clubs, the range was an afterthought during original course construction, often squeezed into whatever space was available. Historically, driving range tee decks were designed much smaller than what we now consider optimal. These early ranges were intended more as quick warm-up areas than primary practice hubs. With today's players spending more time practicing, the demand placed on these smaller, outdated tee decks is often well beyond what they were built to handle. Limited space, subpar growing conditions, and increased usage have forced many superintendents and golf professionals to get creative with their range management strategies.

PRIORITIZING PROPER SETUP

"A well-planned and consistent setup is essential to delivering a premium experience on the range. With increased use, managing the wear and tear on turf becomes a central focus—particularly on natural grass tees. One of the most important strategies is controlling how players use the turf. Encouraging linear divot patterns is a well-known practice that promotes faster and more even turf recovery. Consider incorporating signage that clearly demonstrates the preferred divot pattern. Visual aids can have a strong influence on user behaviour and reinforce best practices.

However, the most effective way to ensure consistent divot patterns is through proactive setup. This includes using ropes, alignment sticks, or wooden dividers to define narrow, controlled hitting areas. By doing so, you can confine wear to a small section each day, promoting maximum turf recovery between sessions.

“ Short game areas are valuable assets... The key is to provide the same conditions players experience on the course. ”

- Victor Ciesielski

Consistency in daily setup is critical. This requires collaboration and communication between turf staff, the back shop, and the golf shop. When areas are moved systematically along the tee line with tight spacing and small gaps between days, the teeing surface is used more efficiently—an essential tactic for facilities with space constraints.



MAINTENANCE AND TURF HEALTH

Beyond setup, daily maintenance plays a vital role in sustaining a healthy and functional range. Regular mowing, divot filling, and irrigation management should be built into your team's routine. Recovery between play intervals is crucial. The more time turf has to regrow after use, the better the surface will hold up across the season.

Facilities should consider their range tee the same way they treat greens, tees, and fairways on the course: as a premium playing surface that requires the right conditions to thrive. Unfortunately, many range areas are located on land with poor drainage, heavy shade, or limited air movement—conditions that can hinder turf health. Identifying and correcting these site limitations is key to improving both turf performance and user experience.

Where possible, assess sunlight exposure and consider selective tree removal or pruning to increase light exposure. Enhancing air movement with vegetation management can reduce disease pressure and improve drying times. Drainage improvements, such as sand capping or regrading, can address waterlogging issues and make the tee more playable after rainfall or irrigation.

THE VALUE OF SYNTHETIC TURF

As usage continues to climb, many facilities are investing in high-quality synthetic hitting mats. These provide an excellent alternative during periods of heavy rain, poor turf recovery, or



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when transitioning between seasons. Today's synthetic mats are designed to closely replicate the feel of natural turf and can offer a consistent experience for players while protecting turf from excessive damage.

Integrating mats into your driving range design doesn't mean sacrificing aesthetics. Modern options can blend seamlessly into the range's visual presentation and often improve the overall look of the facility. Some clubs opt for a combination setup where mats are used during shoulder seasons or rotated in with natural turf areas throughout the week to reduce pressure on grass tees.

DESIGNING FOR REALISM AND VERSATILITY

Beyond the turf itself, the layout of the range plays an important role in player development. Victor Ciesielski, Director of Instruction at Deer Ridge Golf Club, offers insight into what makes a meaningful and engaging range:

"Targets with accurate, daily yardages allow players to simulate on-course situations. Creating defined fairways or realistic green sites on the range gives golfers the opportunity to practice different shot angles—whether it's a tee shot or an approach."

Short game facilities are also gaining popularity. According to Ciesielski:

"Short game areas are valuable assets that can often be integrated into existing practice spaces. The key is to provide the same conditions players experience on the course—matching mowing heights, bunker styles, and green contours. That way, both coaching and skill development become much more transferable to actual play."

Whether it's a simple chipping green or a multi-use complex with bunkers and approach zones, short game areas offer flexibility and realism that can complement a busy driving range. When designed well, they also help divert traffic away from worn turf areas, ultimately extending the life and usability of the grass tees.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Driving ranges are no longer just a warm-up stop before a round—they've become essential tools for game development and central components of a modern golf facility. As player expectations evolve and time spent on the range increases, clubs must reimagine these areas as assets rather than afterthoughts.

By implementing consistent setup practices, investing in proper turf maintenance, addressing design limitations, and integrating alternative surfaces and realistic short game options, courses can deliver a more engaging and sustainable practice experience.

In an era where every square metre of playable space matters, and where the driving range is increasingly viewed as an extension of the course itself, the clubs that lead will be those that treat their range with the care, creativity, and intention it deserves. ■





Short game areas are an effective way to use limited space, reducing concentrated wear and offering members more diverse practice opportunities.