

GolfBUSINESS[®]

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Turn on the Lights



By Steve Donahue

You don't have to stop working on your golf game just because the sun's gone down. For some, the best time to practice can be after dark.

A case in point is Alico Family Golf Center in Fort Meyers, Florida. The lighted, nine-hole short course's holes range from 33 to 80 yards long. The company strove to build a golf community focused on improving games over short periods of time, especially at night — a more convenient time for many.

lasting eight weeks.

Since competition and fun go hand-in-hand, Alico created a night league held on its short course. This is the league's third year, with each session

Alico also is holding two-person women's and youth leagues using the Stableford format, both focusing on the short game. The events, which cost \$15 per round, fit the facility's culture and motto of Learn-Practice-Play.

"There have been multiple bottom-line impacts, including an overall increase in business of 20 percent," says General Manager Kraig Feighery. "Additionally, Alico has had an increase of 50 percent in short-course business during league play, totaling about 1,200 rounds among 200 people. Secondly, the facility has seen a 10-percent increase in lessons for league participants, along with a small increase in sales of wedges, putters and golf balls. We've also had a surge in night business. I also sell 50 percent more food and beverage on a league night, with high energy and a fun atmosphere. I cannot emphasize enough that our short-course league has played a significant role in lowering scores and increasing the fun in the game for many in our community. What else could you ask for?"

For the \$15, league participants get a drink and a round of golf; also a portion of the fee goes to prize money.

"On an eight-week league the net profit alone was over \$1,000 and that was modest," says Feighery. "After they play, they buy a Gatorade, draft beer or glass of wine. The expense goes right to your winnings, the pot. The \$25 per person (two-man teams) buy-in is affordable. If you're running a league like that you take a piece off that for prizes, awards and for the facility. Now you just work for numbers. It can be very profitable. We keep trying to get more leagues going. We've been asked by a country club and a women's association to do a league on Tuesday mornings ... There's another night league that wants to play here, so if you take that formula on a couple of nights it's not difficult to make a nice profit once things are up and running."

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Since the beginning of 2016, Feighery has created eight leagues.

“It has been awesome. Down here there’s not a lot of night golf, so to claim we’re the only ones, at least in the county, to have night golf is pretty cool. Women are playing in it, too, so we handicapped it. In one league, two ladies who were at least 22 handicaps won the league going up against plus handicaps. Some of the better handicaps finished second and third, but we made sure that wasn’t going to happen every week, so we did a hole-in-one contest and it ended up being really cool.”

While Fort Myers-area courses are basically accessible for many, golf has become less accessible for juniors, says Feighery.

“I don’t know why there aren’t courses with three-, six- and nine-hole rates for juniors,” he adds. “I have juniors who want to play 18 or nine, but the course is making them pay a full rate so we made our course accessible to juniors all year. So we have a built-in feeder system to that junior league that’s Monday through Friday, where juniors can play for \$1 from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m., or hit a bucket of balls and parents can pay \$5.”

Since introducing night leagues, Alico’s sales have increased.

“Golfers eat, drink and hang around the facility,” says Feighery. “Anytime you can keep anyone longer or bring them back you’ve got a shot. That’s what we’re all looking for.”

“Food and beverage sales are also up 50 percent on league nights,” says Feighery. “We’re growing and the word keeps getting out. People know they can eat here, where there’s high energy and a fun atmosphere. The price is good and there’s a lot of value. You get really creative, too. We’ve got a local sponsor. We have a contract with some of the food chains where they supply food for us and bring it here. You have to be creative.”

Alico’s food menu is “pretty rudimentary, nothing really crazy,” Feighery says. “Grilled food, adult beverages, finger food, snacks. Nothing like a full menu yet. We’ve been solicited on several attempts but we’re content right now what we’re doing.”

Steve Donahue is a Connecticut-based freelance writer.