

Pittsford Digital Golf credits private club atmosphere as reason for steady growth in memberships

By KEVIN OKLOBZIJA

The newest private golf club in the Rochester area has opened, although the maintenance staff doesn't have a lawn mower or golf hole cutter.

For that matter, there isn't even a maintenance staff.

Instead, Pittsford Digital Golf is attracting members from many of the area's premier clubs by providing a simulated manner in which to play top courses from across the country — even if it's raining or snowing.

Launched in October of 2021, growth for Pittsford Digital Golf at 3750 Monroe Ave. has been steady for the husband-and-wife ownership team of Heather and Mike Nichting. The lure, they say: a club atmosphere.

Members are free to come and go whenever the mood to play strikes them, and they have access to on-site storage space for their golf clubs and shoes.

While several businesses feature golf simulators, Mike Nichting said Pittsford Digital Golf may be the country's first venture catering only to members.

"The recent surge in simulators across town has actually worked in our favor," he said. "It has increased the visibility of indoor golf, ultimately benefiting us. Our unique model, though, ensures that for the right person who is seeking a private club experience, we face no direct competition."

The idea for the business grew out of winter boredom experienced by Nichting and his wife, who are members of an area club. It's pretty tough to golf in January in Rochester, so they were searching for a recreational activity to fill the void.

"Heather and I enjoy playing golf, but in the winter we always felt cooped up and missing the social aspect of the game," he said. "We explored the idea of installing a golf simulator at home, but we determined that if we wanted to do it right, we didn't have the space or budget. On top of that, the social aspect would still be missing."



Photo provided

Mike and Heather Nichting with club pro Mark Deridder.

Sure, they could frequent existing facilities that featured simulators, but he said those locales "didn't offer the comfort and flexibility we wanted. And it really wasn't the environment we were seeking because we didn't want a lot of noise and didn't want to feel obligated to order food and drinks every time we played."

"What we were looking for was a cozy place, like an extension of our home, where we could connect with fellow golfers, play pick-up games, compete in winter tournaments, take lessons, and store our clubs."

Since said facility didn't exist, Pittsford Digital Golf was born. Members pay an annual fee, there are no dues and there is a club pro on site to give lessons, set up tournaments and oversee the golfing side of operations.

Mark Deridder, PGA professional who manages golf at Durand Eastman during the golfing season, is the pro at Pittsford Digital Golf during his offseason.

"We ran an ad with the RDGA (Rochester District Golf Association) looking for somebody to run the place and ended up having a lot of pros apply," Nichting said. "Mark was a real find for us."

The facility features four simulators, and members can choose from around 80 courses to play, including Pebble Beach, St. Andrews Old Course, Hazeltine National, Bethpage Black and the Ocean Course at Kiawah Island. There's even Marco Simone in Rome, site of the 2023 Ryder Cup.



Photo provided

Simulator view of Blackwolf Run in Wisconsin.

The simulators also included the Destination Kohler collection of courses in Wisconsin.

"Some of our members were playing those courses all winter and actually decided to go to Wisconsin to play them," Nichting said.

What also distinguishes Pittsford Digital Golf from other operations, including actual country clubs: Alcoholic beverages are not served, even though the minimum membership age is 21.

While denying themselves a common revenue stream seems counterintuitive to success, Nichting said the policy has served them well.

"In a world where golf and alcohol often go hand in hand, we initially worried this rule might deter potential members," he admitted. "We spent some sleepless nights wondering if we made the right decision."

"(But) we have discovered that most of our members appreciate the atmosphere this policy creates and would not want this rule changed."

The club also serves as a date night destination.

"People like to join with a friend or a spouse," Nichting said. "We're actually very surprised by the number of couples that have joined."

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