

## **Golf, Fitness and Socializing Under One Roof** By Tricia More

**W**e first spoke to Golf Nation in January 2008 as we were on our way to the PGA Merchandise Show and our annual GRAA/*Golf Range Magazine* Solutions Summit. They had just opened, and like other initial contacts from facility owners were proud of their achievements. But unlike other projects, this facility is a bit different; more comprehensive in design and focus. In fact, it's one of the finest indoor/outdoor, golffitness/training/practice centers you'll find in the U.S. Golf Nation is a facility that attempts to integrate the best aspects of a golf range/learning center, a fitness center, a restaurant/banquet center and a pro shop. With roughly two years of business behind them, they can now be confident of their accomplishments. The brainchild of Bob DiMeo, the co-founder of a successful financial services firm in Chicago, Golf Nation has positioned itself to cater to a demographic in big supply in the Chicago-burbs: upwardly-mobile, time-strapped businesspeople looking to combine golf, fitness and socializing. It's a recipe that is working. Built on a monthly membership model (\$59 to \$109 per month) with day pass options (\$30 day/guest fee \$15), Golf Nation has surpassed the 500-member mark and is embarking on a new growth project to expand its fitness facility and programming.

*Golf Range Magazine* spoke with Tim Wuhrman, the hands-on general manager at Golf Nation who has been there since the very beginning. Wuhrman became involved with DiMeo through an on-course golf meeting when Wuhrman was an assistant pro at a Lake Geneva, Wisconsin-based golf course. Together they did extensive homework and visited many top facilities around the country for ideas. In the process they found a super location: a 25,000 sq. ft. storage/showroom building bordering a tranquil prairie preserve. After a quick build out and retrofit lasting a little more than six months, Golf Nation threw open its doors.

A tour of the facility reveals that design and management are focused on providing a clean and inviting environment. Golf Nation did not skimp on amenities for its members/guests. Here then is a look at Golf Nation:

### **Outdoor Micro Range/The Scoring Zone**

The outdoor micro range has six heated and lighted hitting bays with a depth of 75 yards to the back net. Poles and netting rise to 80 feet in height and was designed and installed by Net Connections Inc. The site includes a series of top baffle nets to help with ball containment. The landing area is synthetically turfed with a sand-fill product and was completed by Turf Solutions.

The Scoring Zone, an original design by well-noted PGA teaching pro, Todd Sones, is an innovative short game practice area that allows the teaching staff, anchored by Sones, to work with students on shots 70 yards and in. Within the Scoring Zone area there are 8 targets; an 8-person bunker; 7 tee stations and a 2,900 square foot target green to receive shots. At any one time up to 15 people can be practicing short game shots. Wuhrman explains, "In one of Todd's books he wrote that two thirds of shots are in this yardage range, so that's what we built." Sones, the founder of the golf school, Impact Golf and a perennial Top 50 Golf Digest Teacher coordinates the activities of the four golf instructors on staff. The teaching component at Golf Nation is a critical component of the facility. "We are working with Todd because we know how important a top-notch, consistent teaching program is to our current members and in the ability to help drive sales," says Wuhrman. Members receive complimentary clinics (12 in all per year) every third Thursday at 6:30pm. There are also specific camps and private lessons offered throughout the year. Wuhrman said they are already looking to upgrade several aspects of the Scoring Zone area. "The Scoring Zone now consists of a synthetic turf green and teeline. We mulched the balance of the tee to green area but will be looking to turf it with real grass to allow our players/students the ability to practice from a variety of distances," adds Wuhrman.

### **The Indoor Golf & Lounge Experience: Golf Simulators and the Indoor Skills & Drills Area**

"It's like a private country club inside," says Wuhrman. Indeed, reclining in club chairs and leather



*continue on page 42*

# LF NATION



Owner Bob DiMeo and general manager Tim Wuhrman

*continue from page 40*

sofas in the lounge (adults and members only) and tuning into the flat screen TV is an experience all members can enjoy. Golf Nation golfers can use four, well-appointed indoor hitting bays into netting. There is also a 25,000 sq. ft. true roll synthetic turf indoor putting green as well as chipping/pitching greens for short game work. There are four golf simulators built by Full Swing Golf that are available for individual play and league play. Members can play Pebble Beach, Oakland Hills, St. Andrews, Cog Hill and other courses in the system. Golf Nation is looking to develop a winter league among area country clubs this season and have been busy contacting many the clubs to solicit interest.

**The Fitness Club Experience at Golf Nation**

Depending on the individual, some join for golf with the fitness club seen as a bonus or vice versa. Much care and attention has been brought to the types of equipment to be found in the 4,000 sq. ft. fitness club. Leading fitness equipment companies like FreeMotion (training equipment used by the Chicago Bulls and the White Sox) and Star Trac equipment, an industry leader, is featured prominently and includes: SpinningBikes, treadmills, step climbers, strength training equipment and free weights. “We’ve been very happy with the entire fitness set-up and will be expanding into a whole new studio with more equipment and more classes,” adds Wuhrman. Golf Nation will be bringing in TRX Suspension Training equipment that is aimed at body strength, balance flexibility and core stability. Three of the four fitness instructors at Golf Nation are certified with the Titleist Performance Institute. Some of the classes now being offered through the fitness center include specialty Yoga for Golfers, Pilate’s classes, boot camp fitness and jump rope workouts. They are going to expand and dedicate an area exclusively to spinning classes.

**Marketing and Special Events**

There have been several key areas of emphasis when it comes to press, publicity and membership development. Given the location of the facility and the many neighboring office parks, the outreach to these companies has been a natural progression. One successful strategy has been to get involved with, ‘Building Events’. According to Wuhrman, he gets in contact with the building management of these office parks, reaching out to key employees within the wellness division who are tasked with the goal of improving relations with commercial tenants. Wuhrman then sets up different off-site events in the lobby of the office building at lunch-time offering free day passes and literature about Golf Nation. They have already worked with companies such as Motorola, Square D and Northrup-Grumman as a result of these building events. Another successful best practice not only for existing members but also for marketing outreach has been the scheduling of well-known motivational and/or golf speakers. These are usually held as breakfast clinics that take place on selected Friday mornings and have included the likes of Wally Armstrong, golf clinician and speaker as well as David Cook, author of Golf’s Sacred Journey: Seven Days at the Links of Utopia and a noted sports psychologist. These catered events allow members to invite business guests and serve as community-building occasions and a good networking source for membership. Another area of growth has come from the word of mouth events such as special events, birthday parties, bachelor parties and off-site corporate presentations. With an on-site grill and fully stocked bar, as well as the ability to bring in catering, Golf Nation has become a popular event destination. Recently Wuhrman introduced what is being billed as “The Incredible \$769 Party”. Perhaps the perfect recession-buster, it’s designed as a 16 person party and includes 2 hours of indoor simulator use as well as a buffet meal and open bar.

**Solheim Cup and the BWM Championship at Cog Hill**

Golf Nation took full marketing advantage this past summer of two major golf events taking place in its back yard: The LPGA’s Solheim Cup held at



(Top) The BMW Championship Cup trophy on display. Entrance to Golf Nation located in a 25,000 square foot building. Golf Nation hosted noted golf clinician and lecturer Wally Armstrong at one of its special events. Fitness is front and center at Golf Nation.



(Top) Front reception desk at Golf Nation. Todd Sones, head of instruction at Golf Nation hosting a clinic during the BMW Championship week. There are four Full Swing Golf simulators. The Scoring Zone is an outdoor short game area that can accommodate 15 golfers.

nearby Rich Harvest Farm (Sugar Grove, IL) and the PGA Tour event, The BMW Championship at Cog Hill (Lemont, IL). When the LPGA pulled into town, Wuhrman worked closely to help produce a special night of activities centered around golf, a wine tasting event, and hors d'oeuvres. Even the Waterford Crystal designed Solheim Cup trophy was on display in the clubhouse. In a similar fashion, Golf Nation worked with a sports marketing group working on behalf of BMW to host a number of marketing events in connection to the BMW Championship. Besides selling ticket packages, BMW used the facility to cross promote the tournament with its car line. Everything from floor signage to displays to the BMW trophy was on hand. There were cookout events with music, hole-in-one contests on the simulators, ticket giveaways and the like. Wuhrman will look to develop more of this type of cross promotion at Golf Nation in the future. All of these events as well as general outreach to members are accomplished through frequent email blasts and the occasional use of ESPN radio. Wuhrman received over 6,000 inquiries on their website and mail out a newsletter to membership every month highlighting special events, complimentary clinics, special events and even merchandise specials they may have. ●

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