THE STATE OF THE GOLF COURSE UNION

How constrained supply, rising golfer demand, and fragmented decision-making are creating a new opportunity for owners

A Tech2Turf White Paper

Author Foreword

Golf is often discussed in broad, inherited narratives. Courses are closing. Costs are rising. Golfers are changing. Competition is increasing. All of that may be true in parts, but none of it is sufficient on its own.

The more important truth is that many golf facilities are now operating in a market that is healthier and more opportunity-rich than the industry's older assumptions suggest. Participation is broader. Rounds remain elevated. Untapped interest is substantial and not always recognized. In many markets, the issue is no longer whether golfers exist. The issue is whether facilities are structured to serve them well, capture the full value of demand, and make decisions that protect the long-term interests of ownership (National Golf Foundation, 2025a; National Golf Foundation, 2025b).

That is the lens behind this paper. It is not written to argue that every course is thriving, nor that modernization alone is the answer. It is written to make a simpler case: golf facilities are too often still being led by feel when the market now requires fact. They are too often priced bluntly instead of optimized intelligently. They are too often managed in fragments instead of across the full life cycle of the asset.

This is something that, as Tech2Turf leaders, we have experienced multiple times across different verticals over the years. Those experiences do not make us always right, but they have given us a problem-solving lens shaped by both failure and success that we believe has value in an industry we deeply love. Just as importantly, the gaps we see are not identified by opinion alone. They show up in the data, in missed opportunities inside operations, in underused capacity, in blunt pricing decisions, and in the disconnect between ownership goals and day-to-day execution. So do not take it from us alone. Listen to your data. Listen to what your facility is telling you. Listen to the industry-specific experts and research cited throughout this paper. Yes, instinct and emotion still have a place, but they should not drive the decision-making process.

Owners deserve a clearer operating picture than that. They deserve approaches that look beyond isolated service lines, beyond short-term optics, and beyond initiatives that create cost without creating durable value. The facilities that win the next decade will likely be the ones that align strategy, development, operations, and optimization around measurable reality rather than inherited instinct. Winning comes in many different forms, and we want to help those who recognize there may be a different path they have not yet seen.

That is the opportunity in front of the industry now.

Executive Summary

The golf industry is no longer best understood through a narrative of oversupply and decline. Current data indicates a different reality. Participation remains broad, rounds are at record levels, and demand is being served by materially fewer facilities than during the previous peak of U.S. golf supply.

Total U.S. golf participation reached 48.1 million in 2025, including 29.1 million on-course golfers and 19 million off-course-only participants. That same year produced another all-time high in rounds played, despite the country operating with roughly 2,000 fewer courses than during the early-2000s peak (National Golf Foundation, 2025a; National Golf Foundation, 2025b).

This shift should materially change how owners think about their assets. In many markets, the core challenge is no longer demand generation but demand capture. Nearly two thirds of operators report that their facilities are at or near capacity, underscoring that the constraint is not filling tee sheets but managing access, experience, and monetization intelligently (National Golf Foundation, 2024).

As a result, many facilities leave meaningful value uncaptured. They rely on rate increases rather than improved utilization, accept fragmented operating models, and absorb rising costs without strengthening the long-term resilience of the asset. Golf’s current moment is not merely a participation story; it is an execution story.

The Market Has Changed Faster Than the Industry Mindset

For years, course closures defined the industry’s self-image. The shorthand conclusion was simple: fewer courses must mean a weakening game. That conclusion no longer holds up.

NGF data shows that the post boom correction has largely run its course. Rounds remain at or near record levels even as the country operates with approximately 2,000 fewer facilities than during the Tiger-era peak *(National Golf Foundation, 2025b)*.

This is not just a positive indicator. It is a structural signal. Golf is now operating on a leaner supply base. In many regions, the remaining facilities are carrying a greater share of demand than they once did. The market is increasingly defined by constrained access, tighter operational tolerance, and higher competition for quality tee-time inventory *(National Golf Foundation, 2025b; National Golf Foundation, 2024)*.

In other words, many owners are still reacting to yesterday's fear while standing inside today's opportunity.

This Pattern Is Not Unique to Golf

Golf is not the first industry to experience a faster moving market than its inherited assumptions. Other sectors show clear examples of how outcomes diverge based on response.

Best Buys turnaround illustrates the upside of aligning operations with changing customer behavior, culminating in sustained comparable store-sales gains and strong online growth after multiple years of decline. LEGO’s recent performance tells a similar story, with record results and market-share gains achieved in a challenged toy market while continuing to invest in experience and long-term growth *(Harvard Business School; LEGO Group, 2024)*.

The cautionary side is equally well documented. Blockbuster’s early reluctance to seriously adapt to digital consumption models left it structurally behind competitors as customer behavior shifted *(Harvard Business School, 2011)*.

Golf does not mirror these industries exactly. But no industry is immune to the cost of misreading demand or clinging too long to legacy models. Durable winners tend to be those that respond first and most clearly to what the market is already signaling.

Demand Is Rising, and Broadening

Growth in participation alone does not explain the opportunity. The composition of demand is changing in a meaningful manner as well.

NGF reports that total U.S. participation reached 48.1 million people in 2025, including 19 million individuals who engaged exclusively through off course formats such as simulators, ranges, and entertainment venues. Importantly, 21.2 million Americans who did not play on-course golf in 2025 reported being very interested in doing so, highlighting a substantial latent demand pool *(National Golf Foundation, 2025a)*.

Demographic breadth is also expanding. Nearly 4 million juniors played golf on a course in 2025, the highest figure since 2004, with girls accounting for 35% of junior participation. Women now represent 28% of on-course golfers, matching the highest proportion on record *(National Golf Foundation, 2025a)*.

USGA data reinforces these trends. In 2025, more than 3.68 million golfers with a Handicap Index posted a record 82 million scores domestically, building on strong engagement observed in 2024 and continued growth in flexible formats such as 9-hole play *(USGA, 2025; USGA, 2024)*.

Facilities that still design pricing, programming, and capital plans around a narrow definition of the golfer are increasingly mismatched to the market they serve.

Fewer Courses Does Not Just Mean Scarcity. It Means Capacity Pressure.

A tighter course base does not create opportunity on its own. It introduces new operating stress.

Capacity in golf is not simply about whether a tee sheet appears full. It includes the point at which additional play begins to strain conditioning, staffing, pace, and overall guest experience *(National Golf Foundation, 2024)*.

Many facilities still rely on weak signals. A crowded parking lot is not a demand strategy. A sold-out Saturday morning is not a utilization model. Tee sheets can appear busy while still masking underperformance in shoulder periods, poor segmentation, weak ancillary capture, and pace degradation that erodes long-term value.

The better ownership question is not, are we busy? but, are we capturing demand in a way that strengthens the assets over time?

Many Facilities Are Still Not Capturing the Full Economic Opportunity of the Asset

Many golf facilities are not leaving value on the table because demand is absent, or because the people running them lack experience. More often, they are asked to make important decisions from a fragmented business picture. In broader business settings, disconnected systems and siloed information are tied to weaker coordination, slower decision-making, higher costs, and lost revenue opportunities. McKinsey makes that point directly in its work on master data management and data silos (McKinsey & Company, n.d.).

In golf, that matters because full revenue capability is broader than greens fees alone. It includes how demand is distributed across the tee sheet, how shoulder periods are used, how pricing and pacing interact, how practice and instruction convert, how guest behavior translates into repeat play, and how the overall operating model supports reinvestment.

It also includes the economic value of experience, which is often treated as intangible even as it shows up in behavior, retention, guest confidence, pricing tolerance, and long-term facility relevance. That value is not too soft to measure. Other industries have long used standardized frameworks to evaluate satisfaction, loyalty, and customer effort with consistency. The gap is not that experience cannot be measured. It is that those measurements are too rarely connected back to utilization, retention, and financial performance in a way that supports better ownership decisions (American Customer Satisfaction Index, n.d.).

The market now offers a variety of tee sheets and booking tools, many of which are helpful within their intended lane. But most are designed to improve a specific part of the operating picture rather than to give ownership a fully connected view of the asset. That distinction matters, because the real opportunity is rarely contained in one system or one decision point.

Too often, facilities are left to interpret that picture through disconnected systems, limited reporting, or operating models that solve one part of the business at a time. That can lead to fiscally responsible decisions within an isolated lens yet still leave meaningful value uncaptured across the full asset. The issue is not whether operators are capable. It is whether they have access to a complete enough view of the business to make the most informed decision possible.

Golf facilities should also be understood for what they are financially: year-round assets with year-round obligations that are often evaluated through a compressed revenue season. The asset, the infrastructure, the maintenance burden, the labor planning, the insurance, and the capital exposure do not disappear simply because the strongest rounds are concentrated into a narrower window. That makes utilization, pricing, programming, and shoulder-period strategy more important than they may first appear. In a business built on fixed capacity and perishable inventory, a limited view of the season can easily become a limited view of the asset's full economic opportunity (National Golf Foundation, 2024).

For golf ownership, that creates an important distinction. Traditional support models often solve real operational problems, especially when addressing staffing, administration, and execution. Given the labor pressure facing the industry, it is understandable why many golf-specific providers remain tightly focused there. But solving labor pressure is not the same as seeing the full commercial picture of the asset. Public discussion in golf still tends to emphasize relieving administrative burden and improving day-to-day operations, which is valuable, but that does not always reveal where demand is being under captured, capacity is being underused, or commercial decisions are drifting away from ownership goals (USGA, 2025a; Golf Inc., 2025a).

That broader issue did not begin for us as a theory. It became clearer when a client asked a simple question: how many simulators are right for this facility? On the surface, that sounds like a narrow planning question. In practice, it quickly becomes a much larger business question tied to demand patterns, utilization, guest mix, spacing, programming, capital deployment, staffing realities, and the role the facility is trying to play over time. The challenge was not that capable people were missing the answer. It was that the available systems and business picture were too fragmented to answer it with the level of confidence ownership should expect. That gap is a major part of what led us to develop a proprietary framework designed to give ownership a more complete picture for facility decision-making.

That incomplete picture is rarely accidental. In many cases, it reflects the practical reality that golf facilities are supported through separate systems, defined scopes, and vendor relationships that do not naturally resolve into one clear ownership view of the asset.

Why Functional Support Does Not Always Equal Full Asset Alignment

Golf has no shortage of capable operators, advisors, and service providers. Many of them solve real and important problems for facilities facing staffing pressure, operational strain, or capital uncertainty. That support matters, and in many cases, it creates meaningful value.

The challenge is that most of these models enter the facility through a defined scope. They are built to improve a function, a department, a system, or a category of decision-making. That is not a flaw. It is how most service models are designed.

In practice, many facilities are supported across multiple vendors, platforms, and service scopes that were never intended to create one connected ownership picture. Golf Inc. recently noted that a typical golf course may use 12 to 17 different pieces of software across areas such as tee sheets, lessons, clinics, simulators, food and beverage, and events. That is not simply a technological detail. It is a structural reality that can make it harder for ownership to see the business as one connected asset. NGCOA’s own public guidance around tee-time distribution also reflects a multi-platform environment that requires coordination across systems and channels (Golf Inc., 2025a; Golf Inc., 2025b; National Golf Course Owners Association, n.d.).

That matters because fragmentation is not just a technology inconvenience. McKinsey notes that poor master data management and data silos commonly lead to suboptimal customer and employee experience, higher costs, and lost revenue opportunities. In other words, the issue is not whether any one system or provider is failing. It is that fragmented inputs can still weaken the quality and speed of business decisions across the whole asset (McKinsey & Company, n.d.).

A facility can improve staffing coverage, streamline administration, strengthen booking operations, add technology, or enhance programming and still fall short of its broader economic opportunity. ***A solved lane is not always the same as a stronger asset.***

Ownership is not only responsible for whether each function performs. It is responsible for whether the full facility is becoming more valuable, more resilient, and better aligned with long-term goals.

This is where fragmentation begins to matter. When each piece of the business is viewed primarily through its own scope, system, or vendor logic, the connection between decisions can weaken. Demand capture, guest experience, pricing logic, operational design, capital deployment, and reinvestment capacity are all affected by one another. If those relationships are not being evaluated together, ownership can still be left carrying the gaps between otherwise competent efforts.

The issue is not whether golf has enough capable support. It is whether the market is consistently helping owners see and manage the facility as the full asset it is.

Demand Strength Does Not Eliminate Financial Pressure

A stronger demand backdrop does not mean every remaining facility is financially healthy. In many cases, stronger play is colliding with more difficult operating realities.

USGA research shows that golf course maintenance leaders rank the lack of qualified labor, water cost and availability, and climate-related pressures among the top current and future challenges facing the industry. USGA has also published repeatedly on wage pressure and hiring difficulty in golf maintenance, noting that golf often competes poorly on wages relative to other industries drawing from similar labor pools (USGA, 2025a; USGA, 2022).

This means some courses are experiencing healthy demand while still operating with thin staffing margins, deferred maintenance risk, and higher operating fragility. A busy golf course is not automatically a healthy golf business. Demand strength helps, but it does not remove the need for a disciplined model for converting rounds into sustainable owner value.

The practical consequence is that operating pressure and capital pressure begin to compound. Labor shortages can affect conditioning. Conditioning can affect pace and experience. Experience affects retention, pricing tolerance, and referral behavior. If ownership is not looking at those relationships together, a facility can feel busier while becoming less resilient.

The Industry's Next Advantage Will Come From Fact, Not Feel

Golf has always had a culture of instinct. Experienced operators can often sense when something is off. They know when a tee sheet feels soft, when member behavior is shifting, or when the course is carrying too much strain.

That intuition still matters. But intuition is no longer enough on its own.

The next phase of golf leadership will belong to owners and operators who can define the business more clearly. That means tracking rounds by segment, time of day, and booking window. It means understanding pace degradation points, maintenance pressure by volume, labor efficiency, repeat-play patterns, ancillary spend by user type, and the difference between visible and profitable utilization. In broader business terms, it means moving closer to the integrated, data-led enterprise model now common in more mature commercial environments (McKinsey & Company, n.d.).

It also means viewing modernization correctly. Modernization is not a synonym for technological improvements. It is a business design exercise. The question is not whether a facility can add a new feature, program, or system. The question is whether that addition improves the guest path, staff workflow, demand capture, pricing logic, and long-term economics of the asset.

That distinction matters because capital is finite. Ownership cannot afford to treat every improvement opportunity as equally strategic. The best positioned facilities for the next decade will be the ones that use clearer measurement to decide what truly expands access, strengthens economics, improves experience, and supports reinvestment.

What Ownership Should Do in the Next 12 Months

Owners who want to capitalize on the current market do not need to do everything at once. But they do need to move from assumption to evidence.

It starts with establishing a real demand baseline. Ownership should understand not just how many rounds are being played, but who is playing, when they are playing, how far in advance they book, what formats they prefer, and where demand is being turned away or under-monetized.

From there, ownership should examine pricing and utilization together. The question is not simply whether rates should rise, but whether the facility is capturing its true value across peak, shoulder, practice, lesson, event, and alternative-format demand.

Just as important is understanding operating strain. Ownership should identify where staffing, maintenance, pace, guest flow, or facility design begin to break down under current volume. If the course is near capacity, preserving experience quality becomes a commercial issue, not just an operational one.

Outside relationships should also be reviewed through an ownership-interest lens. Management contracts, consulting relationships, vendor arrangements, and programming structures should all be tested against one question: does this improve the long-term value of the asset, or merely optimize the provider's scope?

Capital decisions should then be sequenced based on evidence. Some facilities need better practice access. Some need demand-distribution changes. Some need infrastructure and flow improvements. Some need a reset in operating model before any visible modernization. In every case, the right answer should follow measured reality, not trend pressure.

Finally, ownership should define a full-cycle strategy. The issue is not only what to change, but how assessment, planning, implementation, operation, and optimization connect. Facilities that treat these stages as disconnected tend to spend more and learn less.

Conclusion

The state of the golf course union is stronger than many outdated narratives suggest. The market is carrying high participation, record rounds, growing latent demand, and broader entry pathways into the game. It is doing so with fewer facilities than during the prior supply peak (National Golf Foundation, 2025a; National Golf Foundation, 2025b).

That is not merely a positive story for golf. It is a strategic opening for ownership.

But ownership will not capture that opportunity through feeling alone. It will not come from reacting to busyness with blunt pricing, from accepting fragmented systems at face value, or from treating modernization as a disconnected purchase rather than a full-cycle operating decision.

The facilities that win the next decade will likely be the ones that understand their demand most clearly, protect the experience most deliberately, allocate capital most intelligently, and evaluate every operating decision through the lens of long-term asset value.

Golfs current moment is not just a participation story. It is an execution story.

And in that story, fact now matters more than feel.

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