

Opinion: How to improve Calif.'s golf game

By Joe Mathews

Your columnist is not an Olympic athlete. But I recently managed to play 18 holes of golf in just 45 minutes, without using a cart or lifting a golf club. And, no, this wasn't a video game.

My secret? I was playing FootGolf, which involves kicking a soccer ball into extra-large holes placed on regulation golf courses. This new sport, spreading fast in California, is one promising answer to a full-blown statewide challenge: what to do about our glut of golf courses?



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In California, golf is not a matter of fun and games. For more than a century, the sport has helped define our state's landscape, tourism, real estate market, and the municipal finances of the hundreds of California cities with public courses. Today, golf is a \$13 billion California industry—10 times bigger than the legal side of another grass-oriented business, cannabis.

But golf has had a very bad decade, with the number of golfers and courses declining after 60 years of growth. This decline is jarring because California's growth has been so tied to golf. The game was a big part of the leisure culture that

Californians created as a challenge to America's Puritan ethic and as a lure for millions of people to relocate here in the 20th century.

Entire regions—from Coachella Valley to Monterey Bay —fashioned themselves around leisure and golf. And new courses were used to promote new housing developments around the state. In the 1950s, the Thunderbird Country Club in Rancho Mirage, one of the earliest such developments, allowed Ford to use its name on a new car model, which in turn inspired a classic Beach Boys song about a fun-loving girl driving her daddy's automobile. Does it get any more Californian than that?

While playing golf feels like an individual pursuit, this growth in the game was heavily subsidized, through development-friendly tax laws and by local governments that saw courses as an essential amenity. That investment in golf seemed wise in the 1990s when an Orange County kid raised on municipal courses—Tiger Woods—inspired a younger, more diverse generation to take up the game.

But in 2006, California's housing crisis crashed the global economy, and the whole world turned hard against California golf. The middle class that sustained so many golf courses no longer had the money to devote to an extravagant pastime. Golf suddenly was out of step: a face-to-face pastime in a world that prefers digital communication, a slow and courteous game in a fast and impolite society, a Republican-leaning sport at a time when the Republican Party is cracking up. Trends in fitness also work against golf, with many Californians seeking less relaxing exercise, and slimmer bodies than you find on golf courses.

With fewer customers playing fewer rounds—and higher water bills during the drought—California golf courses have struggled. Some have closed, and dozens more may follow suit. But replacing a golf course is a quandary. Some courses are

next to industrial sites or airports, and remain useful as buffers. It might make sense to turn golf courses into desperately needed housing or public parks, but regulations and politics make such conversions difficult and expensive.

In the meantime, golf course operators are seeking new uses for their courses—from concerts to film shoots to car shows. Some courses have experimented with events for young singles that combine hitting golf balls with video games and drinking.

One of the better innovations is FootGolf, now being popularized by the Palm Springs-based American FootGolf League. More than 150 golf courses nationwide added Foot Golf last year, and I tried it out one morning at an 18-hole par three golf course in Arcadia, in the San Gabriel Valley.

The course had added separate tees and small greens, with 21-inch-wide holes, off to the sides of its usual golf greens. At the pro shop, I handed over a \$15 green fee to a young course employee named Jordan Godfrey, who happens to be America's national FootGolf champion. He warned me not to damage the well-manicured regular golf greens by kicking off of them.

I had a great time. Without a bag of golf clubs to carry, I jogged around the course in 45 minutes. The three real golfers on the course greeted me warmly and let me play through. And I narrowly avoided falling into the giant holes when fishing my ball out of them.

My only mishap came on the damp fifth tee, when I fell as I kicked the ball 50 yards down the fairway, landing hard on my bottom. That's never happened to me playing regular golf. But no great California transformation is without its risks.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zocalo Public Square.