

# Golfers, golf courses enjoying return to the game

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Lindsey Shuey / Staff Photographer  
Golfers ride in a golf cart at Mountain Valley Golf Course in Barnesville on Thursday, May 7, 2020. Golf courses around the county are taking precautions to keep golfers safe amid COVID-19 by sanitizing golf carts, limiting the number of people in the pro shop, and offering one cart per golfer.



The weather was beautiful Thursday.

Bright sun, light wind, temperatures in the mid-60s. A perfect day for golf.

Orwigsburg residents Beth Gerhard and Kristin Greenawalt were taking advantage of all that goodness at Hidden Valley Golf Course.

After hitting a few putts on the practice green, they headed to their carts and made their way to the first tee to begin their round.

Golf, after a nearly six-week shutdown forced by the coronavirus pandemic, has been back for about a week.

The golfers, and the local courses that provide them the opportunity to enjoy the game, couldn't be happier.

"It's just great to be out in the fresh air," Gerhard said.

The duo said in a normal year they might get together once or twice to play, but this was already their fourth opportunity to traverse the fairways this year, the second time since Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf allowed golf courses to resume activity May 1.

"It's nice to get out of the house, have a good time, share some laughs with a friend," Greenawalt said. "And, hopefully hit some good shots."

Safety first

While the courses are open, there are some restrictions and safety precautions that need to be observed by the golfers.

They seem to be universal among the courses and are designed with the health and safety of both the golfers and course workers in mind. Thursday visits to Hidden Valley, Mountain Valley Golf Course and the Schuylkill Country Club found everyone very accepting to the new rules.

Among them:

- Signs are posted that limit only two patrons at a time to be in the pro shop. Also, masks must be worn inside by everyone at all times.

- Tee times are spaced farther apart than they would be under normal circumstances with the goal being twofold in keeping

more distance among groups on the course and keeping things from becoming congested in the pro shop and cart pickup areas.

- Golfers, unless they are family members who reside together, are limited to one person per riding cart. (One exception noted at Mountain Valley was that if two golfers made the drive together to the golf course, they are permitted to ride together on the course.)

- Social distancing is to be practiced by golfers on the course. Gathering in groups is discouraged, as are high fives and things of that nature.

- Services in the clubhouses and snack bars are limited. Both Hidden Valley and Mountain Valley have "curbside" service available with golfers able to call in orders from the course prior to making the turn or as the end of their round nears. Schuylkill Country Club is working on making a similar service available in the near future.

- Flagsticks are not allowed to be removed from the holes, and with that in mind, cups have been altered to allow golfers to remove golf balls easier without reaching down into the hole.

- All three courses have been diligent about sanitizing, both inside the pro shop as well as golf carts, which are cleaned and sanitized upon completion of a round, to protect the safety of everyone involved.

It's all

about common sense

Reaction and compliance from golfers has been overwhelmingly positive.

"I would say 98 percent of the people have done everything we've asked," said Lyle Porter, assistant general manager and head of the pro shop at Mountain Valley. "And the other two percent, that's not issues or problems. It's probably more confusion over some of the new things."

At the Schuylkill Country Club, Larry Borden, who has been the club pro for 38 years, said one additional step is being undertaken to protect the golfers from contamination when they're on the course.

"Well, one difference is right now they're not allowed to touch the flag and the cups aren't totally all the way down in the hole because we don't want people reaching in there," Borden said. "The cup is only down in about an inch in the ground."

"We have devices that we just got today that you strap onto the pole and it goes down into the hole. The ball goes down into the hole, sits on a plate and there's a handle at the top (of the stick) and you just use your putter to pull it up and it pops the ball out. We are installing those."

At Hidden Valley, which began allowing play May 2, Pro Shop Manager Mike Stank said everything has been running smoothly and golfers have been more than willing to adhere to the new regulations.

"They're just happy to be out," Stank said. "(They're) very thankful for us to do everything we can so they can be allowed out."

"They're observing the restrictions and having a good time."

Mountain Valley has also taken one additional step with the golfer's safety in mind.

"One of the other things, too, when they go into the pro shop and they check in, when they come out, we have a large box that's filled with sanitized wipes and they can take them so that they can wipe down their score cards, their pencils, anything of that nature," said John Rizzo, director of operations. "Just an added protection that we're doing."

Needed business

The golf courses are, first and foremost, businesses. Spring, summer and fall are their best opportunities to create revenue. A six-week shutdown during that time can cause financial difficulties.

So, in that respect, the return to golf and the influx of customers has been a blessing.

"I think it's very good to generate some revenue and in a time when we're not doing any functions in the clubhouse, it's nice to get people on property, playing golf, buying a sandwich, drinking a few beers or soda," Rizzo said. "It's great, great just to have people on

property. Our full staff is back.”

Ken Huebner, vice president and general manager at Mountain Valley, said everyone involved has been pleased with the way things have gone over the first week of returning to operation.

“People were anxious to get out and we were anxious to have them here,” Huebner said. “Financially, obviously, it’s extremely important to be open.

“We’ve been maintaining the course, obviously, during the time period we were closed and the course is in great shape right now. The course is ready, we’re ready and we’re doing the social distancing. We’re trying to do whatever is possible to make it as safe as possible for both our customers and our employees.”

In addition to the golf, the revenue stream at all three venues is helped along by hosting banquets, dinners, reunions, etc. Current safety regulations in Pennsylvania do not allow for those type of gatherings, making the return to golf and the influx of golfers even that much more important.

“We’re not thriving financially as a club, but we’re not doing bad either,” Borden said. “This is going to help us.

“It’s needed revenue, plus the clubhouse is not open yet. Who knows in the future what they’re going to allow us to do, whether they allow us to have 20 (people) at a time or 50 at a time or what will it be.”

Amount of play

All three venues indicated — weather permitting — a full slate of golfers has been the norm.

Schuylkill Country Club opened May 1 and Borden says the response from members has been excellent.

“The response has been ‘Get out of the house and let’s go play golf,’ ” Borden said. “We’re almost double our play of what we would normally do.

“What I’m finding out is people are walking more than what they did previously.”

At Hidden Valley, play has been steady with good numbers of golfers every day that the weather allows.

“We opened Saturday (May 2),” Stank said. “With the exception of yesterday (Wednesday) with weather, it’s been very busy.

"One person per cart really limits us with the number of people we can get out in a day. We clean carts and get them back out on the course. I believe we averaged about 170-180 (golfers) over the weekend. Monday, probably the same. Tuesday it was down a little bit, maybe 120, which is actually really good for a Tuesday. They're glad to be out."

At Mountain Valley, the situation has been much the same. The May 1 opener wasn't the best as far as weather, but golfers still got their fix.

"The weather wasn't all that great, but they were still out," Rizzo said. "We had the diehards.

"Saturday and Sunday, the weather was better and we were packed from the time we opened 'til we closed. It was extremely good, gratifying to see everybody there."

#### Course conditions

Even with the unwanted, but necessary, break in play, routine maintenance was necessary. Crews needed to be on hand to mow grass and manicure greens and tee boxes. The hard work paid dividends.

Fairways at all three courses are lush and green. Greens and tee boxes are immaculate.

"One thing the break did was give us five to six weeks to work on the course," Stank said. "It's in good shape and it looks great.

"We've had a lot of compliments."

At Mountain Valley, which features two 18-hole layouts, the effort needed to be doubled.

"We're 36 holes," Rizzo said. "Even with the shutdown, we had to continue to mow and maintain the course.

"Everything is in excellent shape."

The weather, with just enough rain, just enough sun and warm temperatures during the shutdown, also played a role in allowing the courses to reopen in tip-top shape.

"Maintenance was still being done," Borden said. "We brought in four guys just to maintain fairways and rough.

"Everything is perfect. The weather actually has cooperated. It hasn't been really warm, but we're getting enough rain and enough sunshine to keep it perfect. Traffic wasn't on it, so that kept it nice."

#### Driving ranges

At Schuylkill Country Club, Borden said the driving range remains closed, but plans are in the works to resume that option for golfers to work on their game in the near future.

At both Hidden Valley and Mountain Valley, the ranges are open and active.

“Our driving range has been very busy,” Rizzo said. “We’ve had a lot of people anxious to work on their game.

“We have a manager over there who continually washes the balls so that they’re clean.”

Rizzo also pointed out another benefit to having the driving range available for patrons of the club.

“One of the nicest things to see, with young kids not able to play baseball, not able to play softball, we see a lot of fathers bringing their kids up to hit balls. Just to get them out of the house to have an activity.”

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