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Family-Friendly Short Courses Are Gaining Favor

Many golf communities are adding pint-size courses, which appeal to children as well as to parents who lack the time to play 18 holes.



The Nest, a 10-hole short course that opened last summer at Cabot Cape Breton, a golf community in Nova Scotia, offers night golf. The course can be completed in just over an hour. Andrew Culp

Even in Cabot Cape Breton, a golf community perched across sandy cliffs in remote Nova Scotia, the waves pounding against the dunes can't erase the pandemic pressures of video calls and remote-work deadlines.

They also can't extend the stamina of a child or novice golfer, so last summer, [Cabot Cape Breton](#) opened the Nest: a 10-hole short course that can be completed in just over an hour.

The Nest's opening came as hundreds of other short courses have been designed or unveiled across the globe in golf communities, which have seen record-breaking sales to families with young children.

At Haig Point, a golf community on Daufuskie Island, S.C., where prices are up 14 percent since before the pandemic, families have comprised nearly 25 percent of new buyers and the average age of residents is now 51. Before Covid, it was 63.

As parents increasingly convert a quick turn on the golf course into a family activity squeezed between virtual meetings, golf communities are boosting their amenities with pint-size courses that can shift a round of golf into a true family affair.

“Short courses are all the vogue now,” said Ben Cowan-Dewar, chief executive of Cabot Cape Breton. “We’ve seen them everywhere.”

Short courses are not new — courses with nine or 10 holes have been gaining steam since the 1950s as fast and fun alternatives to the full 18-hole experience.

But as social mores have shifted over the decades, so has the demand for a different type of golf experience. Women worked their way not just into the boardroom but also onto the back nine; men began to take more active roles in their children’s lives; smartphones, and all their buzzing alerts, began accompanying people everywhere they went.

Then came Covid-19, and its trifecta of remote work, virtual school, and the need for activities in the open air.

As sales of golf homes rose among families with children, “short courses really took flight because they allowed families to recreate together safely, outside and socially distanced,” said John Kirk, a partner at the architecture firm Cooper Robertson. “Younger golfers don’t necessarily have the stamina or patience for a more prolonged golf outing, and have other things going on in their lives, so this works.”

Short courses, where a round of play can cost half as much as on a full-size course, also are part of a bigger cultural shift, said Rob Duckett, vice president of South Street Partners, which has developed several master-planned golf communities in the Southeast including [Kiawah Island Club](#) and [Kiawah Island Real Estate](#), [the Cliffs](#) and [Palmetto Bluff](#).

With the arrival of younger residents, there’s been a push for more casual, relaxed programming, thinking beyond the traditional parameters of retirees playing golf.

“At our properties, we have added fun programming such as night golf, music on the range, and comfort stations to the golf courses with signature dishes and cocktails that make golf more of a social event that is still enjoyable for experienced golfers while less intimidating for new ones,” Mr. Duckett said in an email. “The addition of nongolf amenities that appeal to a broader age range, such as [pickleball](#) and shooting, is also a shift I’ve seen. Basically, thinking about programming and activities that appeal to the whole family, rather than just traditionally catering to dads.”

Karen and Brad Cook, avid golfers who live in Maui and are building a 3,400-square-foot, four-bedroom home at Cape Breton, are hoping that the community’s new short course will help them pass on their love of golf to their two boys, 11 and 13.

“There’s a lot less pressure playing a par-3 course than there is playing the big course,” said Mr. Cook, who owns an engineering company. “And the attention span for golfing for younger kids just isn’t the same.”

Cabot Cape Breton has two top-ranked full-length courses: Cabot Links, designed by Rod Whitman, and Cabot Cliffs, designed by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw. Mr. Whitman, along with Dave Axland, was tapped to design the new short course.

Cabot Cape Breton’s real estate offerings, which range from two-bedroom golf villas to four-bedroom homes, run about \$825,000 to \$2.5 million.

Mr. Cowan-Dewar said they were often occupied by families with children. That mirrors trends seen across North America among families, who continue to seek new homes outside of cities.

Across the United States, relocation from major urban centers to smaller metro areas rose 23 percent in 2021, according to the National Association of Realtors.

Mike Williams, managing director of [Innisbrook](#), a golf resort in Palm Harbor, Fla., said that it was not just families who had been drawn to short courses during the pandemic. With business travel shut down and conventions on hold, he has seen a sharp spike in business colleagues gathering on one of the four courses at Innisbrook in clusters of three or four, where they combine networking and novice golf practice into one or two-hour segments.

Innisbrook has taken note and is now converting their full-size North Course into a short course. The project will leave them with some unused land, so they plan to convert those additional acres into spots for new residences. They don't yet have an estimated completion date.

"We have seen a very robust golf group segment grow as conventions and conferences evaporated," Mr. Williams said. He notes that competitors including [Pebble Beach](#) and [Pinehurst](#) have recently added their own short courses. "In order for Innisbrook to remain competitive and be mentioned in the same breath as some of those resorts, we feel compelled to put in a short course as well," he said.

At [Suncadia Resort](#) in Elum, Wash., nearly 300 new homes have been built in the last two years.

Mike Jones, Suncadia's golf director, said that he had seen the number of children on both the Arnold Palmer-designed Prospector golf course, as well as the Jacobsen Hardy-designed Rope Rider short course, increase by 50 percent.

"I used to view this as a second home for a lot of people, and the residents that did live here full time, the majority were retired," Mr. Jones said. "And since the pandemic, all these young kids started moving here and what I started noticing was I'd be at Prospector and I'd see three young kids on the putting green, and they didn't know the other kids, and there just wasn't a community feel."

To cater to the new arrivals, Mr. Jones started a PGA Jr. League, and also launched a meet and mingle program on the green, where members could gather to get to know each other and cocktails were served for the adults.

Charles Nay, who purchased a 3,000-square foot, four-bedroom cabin at Tumble Creek, a private neighborhood within the Suncadia community, in September 2020 for his family, prefers to play at Prospector. But he believes the short course is ideally suited for his 13-year-old daughter.

"When she and her friends want to golf, they get bored and don't necessarily want to play 18 holes," said Mr. Nay, who lives in Seattle.

In Big Sky, Mont., the [Spanish Peaks Mountain Club](#) community will be putting in a new short course this spring in addition to its existing 18-hole Tom Weiskopf-designed course. It will be a 10-hole par-3 course, something that Mr. Weiskopf said the community had been considering for years.

"Covid really gave golf a shot in the arm," he said. "Spanish Peaks has so many members with big families with grandkids, and they want to do what grandpa and grandma do, or with their dad and mom. It's a great way to get people started in the game."