

A glowing handicap

GLOWGOLF IS IDEAL FOR VACANT MALL SPOTS — IT HAS TO BE PLAYED INSIDE

By Dees Stribling

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OST MINIATURE-GOLF

courses are outdoors. Glowgolf miniature golf would not work outdoors, though, because the gimmick here is that the balls, clubs and other things on the course glow under black lights. Thus, indoor space is needed — mall space, as it happens.

Malls once turned up their noses at such low-cost entertainment venues. Not anymore. There are 18 Glowgolf courses in Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee and Wisconsin, all of them in malls, and the concept is growing even through these hard times.

Wichita, Kan.-based Glowgolf is the brainchild of Reginald Boothe and John Wright, whose background is in golf-course management. Earlier, they operated several glow-in-the-dark driving ranges using golf balls that lit up. That business did not succeed, but it occurred to Boothe and Wright that glowing golf balls might work very well with miniature golf, if the setting was right. So they set out in the late 1990s to find a retail property that would be interested in leasing space. As it happens, they were not the only ones to think of it. Other glow-in-the-dark mini-golf chains are

Lunar Mini Golf and the Ontario, Canada-based Putting Edge.

All these are miniature golf. The dif-

ference is in the glow. Besides the balls, part of the putters glow. The Glowgolf courses' black walls feature brightly colored scenes showing marine animals or jungle landscapes. Otherwise, though, in terms of layout and obstacles, the courses differ little from standard miniature golf courses (including the obligatory windmill). Glowgolf courses vary in size from 4,000 square feet to 60,000 square feet, so the concept can suit a variety of spaces, within limits.

These days any tenant that pays its rent and attracts families to an enclosed mall is probably going to be welcome. It was not always so. A decade ago Boothe and Wright found their concept to be a hard sell. Retail landlords seemed to see no need for such entertainment venues in those go-go retail days when properties were leasing up almost as fast as developers could build, and most es-



established malls had little trouble keeping their tenant rosters full. "Maybe no one thought that miniature golf was a good fit," said COO Wright. "But more

The appeal is certainly basic: Entertainment for a modest price.

recently, they've come around to the idea. Now owners are seeking us out."

In 2002 Opry Mills decided that Glowgolf would be a good fit. Opry Mills, a super-regional mall in Tennessee, is located next to Nashville's famous Grand Ole Opry. Families looking for a little low-key fun while visiting Opry Mills can find it at the mall's Glowgolf.

Glowgolf slowly established a track record, and other landlords warmed to it. Then came the financial meltdown of 2008 and the ensuing recession. "We were pretty sure that the recession would mean that we wouldn't be

able to open any more locations, but it didn't work out that way," said Wright. "We started opening more than ever."

The company opened 10 courses last year, and Wright says it will probably open as many again this year. The implosion of the Steve & Barry's clothing chain provided a number of places for Glowgolf to set up shop, Wright says.

Some of these are short-term leases. In the Stratford Square Mall, in Bloomingdale, Ill., Glowgolf took over a Steve & Barry's space after the latter's disappearance early last year. The mall leased the space to another retailer several months later and Glowgolf had to go, though not very far.

Stratford Square had another vacancy that Glowgolf could fill, on the second level. And so Stratford Square visitors can still play glow-in-the-dark miniature golf, right across from a Cold Stone Creamery.

The appeal is basic, Wright says: entertainment for a modest price. "It doesn't cost much to play, like any miniature golf, but it has a glow-in-the-dark twist that adds to the fun," he said. "People like it, and it helps keep them in the mall." sct



Golf tees off

The traditional-golf retail industry continued to shrink in the first quarter of 2010, although at a slower rate than it has in recent years, Martin Hanaka, the CEO of retail chain Golfsmith told investors on the chain's earnings call.

Compared with the first quarter of 2009, the number of rounds of golf played in the U.S. fell 13 percent, according to research firm Golf DataTech. Same-store sales fell 1.7 percent from last year, and the chain lost \$4.8 million. The decline in playership has driven many regional and local operators out of business, Hanaka said. Five years ago about 1,800 golf stores operated in the U.S. Today, the number is more like 1,250, he added. Golfsmith currently operates about 70 stores.

As the chain ramps up for the second quarter, which Hanaka calls "Christmas in the golf industry," it plans to turn more browsers into buyers and build market share in the new cities where it has recently opened stores. In the past year it has opened stores in Brea, Calif.; Brookfield, Wis.; Overland Park, Kan.; Palm Desert, Calif.; and relocated its Troy, Mich., store. sct