

Montreal

Golf courses aim to be among first wave of Quebec businesses to reopen

Despite current closures, province's golf courses are preparing for the season ahead

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Ground crews at golf courses in Quebec are considered essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Simon Martel/CBC)

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The protective winter tarps came off the greens and fairways at many golf courses around the province of Quebec this week.

It's usually a sure sign of spring, and for golfers, it's a signal to start gearing up for the new season.

But with the COVID-19 outbreak, this year is different.

"Whoever I speak to, the first thing I say to them is, 'I can't wait to see you, because when I see you that means we're open and we're in business,'" said Gary Lagden, general manager of Le Blainvillier golf course in Blainville, Que.

Golf courses, like most other businesses in the province, are closed right now.

Still, over the last few weeks, Lagden and a skeleton crew — about half the usual number of employees — have been working around the clock to prepare his 36-hole championship golf course.

Their work is deemed essential by the government, despite the fact that no one has a clear idea if or when golfers will be able to use the course this season.

"Our asset is our golf course. We needed to protect it," Lagden said.



Gary Lagden, general manager of Le Blainvillier, says his crews are observing strict social distancing rules while they prepare the golf course for a new season. (Simon Martel/CBC)

His employees are observing strict distancing guidelines, Lagden said, which is challenging and slowing down the work but is still much better than leaving the course untouched.

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"We would lose our greens completely. We would have to start from scratch. Everything would just be dead. We would have to reseed and resod everything, at tremendous expense," he said.

Course projecting major losses

David Skitt, executive director of the Quebec Golf Course Association, said his members are prepared to take on some major financial losses this season.

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They're expecting large revenue earners — the clubhouse restaurants, the shops where they sell equipment and the venues they often rent out for events like weddings — to be mothballed for months.

The courses themselves are the core of their business, and letting them fall into disrepair could be devastating.

"Across the country, it's a multi-billion-dollar industry," said Skitt. "Golf courses are a living organism. The grass is growing, and if we don't do anything right now, that would be some big losses to golf courses."



David Skitt, executive director of the Quebec Association of Golf Courses, says golf should be among the first wave of activities allowed to resume. (Simon Martel/CBC)

Skitt is optimistic that even if the clubhouses are closed, golfers will be able to play the game they love sooner rather than later.

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The association argues that golfers can easily conform to physical-distancing guidelines, and the government should consider it to be among the first wave of activities approved to resume when the pandemic subsides, and the economy starts to reopen.

"It is the candidate. It's one of the only sports where you can keep your distance from the other players," Lagden said. "It gives you a chance to get some exercise, get some fresh air."

Not exactly golf as usual

If golfers do have the opportunity to get back to the action sooner than other sports, Skitt said the players should expect changes to the game.

Foursomes would likely be cut down to twosomes; electric carts or pull carts would likely be unavailable; flags would have to stay in the hole, and that familiar sound golfers love of a ball dropping into the cup might be a thing of the past.

"The hole might be pulled out an inch so you'd never have to put your hand into the hole and never touch the flagpole," Skitt said.





The Quebec Golf Course Association says golfers should expect new rules for social distancing when they return to the courses this spring. (Simon Martel/CBC)

Still, he's hopeful some courses will be open for golfers as early as the first week of May.

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"It's not the time to be putting an immense amount of pressure [on the government] and saying this has to happen," Skitt said. "But once we get the go, I can tell you that everybody in the association is ready to go."

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Golf industry needs to adjust

Many in the industry say that adjustments are going to be necessary to mitigate financial losses.

Equipment manufacturers and sales representatives are bracing for a tough year ahead.

"I know my end-of-year numbers, everyone's end-of-year numbers, are going to be down," said Shawn Perno, a sales representative for TaylorMade Golf.

"I always try to look at the positive side, and the conversations that I've had with customers have been positive. I'm keeping the outlook of keeping customers like caged lions where once you let the door out, they're going to come out, and they're going to be hungry."

Skitt said the association is working on programs to satisfy golfers who will be anxious to make up for lost rounds due to the shutdown.

One idea is a "buy local" program to boost traffic on Quebec's courses once they're fully open.

"Once life does somewhat get back to normal, people probably aren't going to be going too far away for their summer holidays," Skitt said.

"Stay home and play golf instead. That's one of the big things that I think will help us rebound this year."

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