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Gimme Golf: From stuffy to stylish, post pandemic, golf is cool again with a growing number of younger players

BY BRIGITTE SURETTE

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Hole No. 16 at The Ocean Course at Kiawah Island Golf Resort Photo/Uzzell Lambert, Kiawah Island Golf Resort.

Historians trace the game of golf back to 13th century Europe when men whacked a ball around with sticks. There is evidence that the same was happening in Asia and Africa in the 11th century, according to [Golf.com](#).

The Scottish are credited for cultivating the rudimentary ball-and-stick game into the game we know now. According to historian Maggie Lagle of the United States Golf Association, ancient games were played on fields with livestock. Golf came to

America in the mid-1600s, popular in New York City, Charleston and Savannah. Harleston Green is reported to be the first golf club in the U.S. in the late 1700s.

Tiger Woods introduced a whole new demographic to the game of golf in the late 1990s. An ESPN 2017 [article](#), read: “Woods dragged golf—a sport most Americans have never played—into the Land of Cool.”



The number of people who never played golf did so in 2020, 3 million of them and that's a record. In addition, 3.1 million junior golfers played the courses in 2020, a new record and 34 percent of them were girls. Photo/Kiawah Island Golf Resort/KIRE.

That “cool” cooled somewhat when Woods made headlines in 2009 for personal issues, and then subsequent health and injury complications. When Woods had to leave, excitement about the sport left with him.

In 2020, when the pandemic was bringing so many indoor sports to a halt, golf aligned itself as the perfect pastime— small groups, outside and socially distanced— its tempo rose to new heights once more.

According to the National Golf Foundation, there are approximately 101 million golfers in the United States, with 36.9 million playing the sport in 2020 on the course and off. Among that number, are 18-34-year-olds, 5.9 million of them. That's a lot of swings, and an all-time record.

The golf groove

Not surprisingly, golf communities are benefitting from the demand of pandemic-induced interest in the sport. Golfers are flocking to those communities where they can live and golf any day of the week.

An interview in [Golfweek](#) in January 2021 with **Jason Becker**, a PGA pro and CEO of Golf Life Navigators found that "...the golf real estate component is on fire." Becker said that pre-pandemic 58 percent of buyers wanted to live outside the gates of a golf community. In 2021, the number has dropped to 38 percent. Golf communities have been able to pivot quickly and efficiently to implement COVID-related safety measures, and living inside a gated community has a "safe" aspect to it. Becker believes that in the future the clubs inside these communities will have a more active role in real estate sales.



Becker

In the Lowcountry, there are a myriad of options to live in golf communities, or very near one.

PGA pristine



The Pete Dye designed Ocean Course has the most seaside holes in the Northern Hemisphere with ten of them hugging the Atlantic and the other eight running parallel to those. It is challenging to the most advanced players and is world renown. Photo/Uzzell Lambert, Kiawah Island Golf Resort.

You can't talk golf in the Lowcountry without mentioning Kiawah Island's courses. From 1991's Ryder Cup to 2003's World Cup, and 2005's and 2021's PGA Championship, the Ocean Course has a global reputation for exceptional golf. The Kiawah Island Club focuses on making golf more family oriented, creating a diversified member experience and employing special events to introduce golf to a whole new demographic. Their programs are embracing the new wave of young golfers who are increasingly joining the golf groove.



South Street Partners, from left: left to right Will Culp, Patrick Melton, Jordan Phillips and Chris Randolph.

South Street Partners, the largest master-planned community developer in the Southeast, whose real estate portfolio includes Kiawah Island Club, recently launched Advance Kiawah. The initiative includes making a more direct, conscious effort to expand diversity in all areas of Kiawah Island. It has already made an impact in the area of golf at Kiawah Island Club through creating employment opportunities, a speaker series program and a golf internship program to include recruitment for people of color.



Varner

The Kiawah Island Club has partnered with PGA Tour Champion and youth sport advocate, **Harold Varner III**. Varner won the 2016 Australian PGA Championship and recently tied for 2nd at the 2021 RBC Heritage on Hilton Head. He is the club's newest golf ambassador. Varner's focus of his [HV3 Foundation](#) (which he created in 2019) emphasizes providing affordable access to youth in sports and it aligns with the Advance Kiawah initiative. After school programs, camps and instruction, in addition to financial assistance for equipment, has helped offset barriers to entry through his personal funding, fundraising, donations and sponsorships. The HV3 Foundation will host their 2021 annual charity tournament at the Kiawah Island Club.



An aerial view of Front Nine Lanes, a collection of lock and leave luxury homes on Kiawah Island. Front Nine Lane's residences mark the landscape in trio formations, arranged in a modified horseshoe pattern, with each home bordering a shared green space and within close proximity to The Ocean Course. Photo/KIRE.

Homes for sale on these tony courses are in demand. Front Nine Lanes is Kiawah Island Real Estate's newest offering of lock and leave homes for luxury living. Each home has spectacular views of the Ocean Course and are set along the island's eastern tip. They start at \$3.5 million.



Whitson

“Each home’s prime placement within the environmentally sensitive community of Ocean Park has access to the community’s most coveted amenities,” said **Danielle Whitson** of Kiawah Island Real Estate.

From July 2020 to July 2021, Kiawah Island Club courses, the River Course and Cassique Course had a 58 percent and 81 percent increase, respectively, of golf participation over the same period in 2019 to 2020. The club’s golf learning centers

and clinics rose 51 percent at the River Course and 29 percent at Cassique.

“We are focused on making golf more family oriented and approachable for all skill levels so that everyone can participate, not just advanced golfers,” said **Chris Randolph** of South Street Partners. “Night golf, adding music and comfort stations to the golf courses with signature dishes and cocktails—makes golf more of a social event, enjoyable for experienced golfers, less intimidating for new ones and more appealing to a younger demographic.”

Bluffton golf community



Set within the 20,000-acre community of Palmetto Bluff in Bluffton, the May River Golf Course is an 18-hole Jack Nicklaus Signature Course designed to challenge golfers of all skill levels. It features wide fairways with strategic bunkers and natural waste areas. All tee boxes and fairways feature Paspalum, the newest eco-friendly turf. Caddie service is required with each round, and players are encouraged to walk the course to best appreciate the beautiful native landscape. Photo/Palmetto Bluff.

South Street Partners recently acquired **Palmetto Bluff** in Bluffton, a 20,000-acre property surrounded by 32 miles of riverfront and nature trails, with two village centers. The Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course, the May River Golf Course, winds through the May River Forest.

“Palmetto Bluff Golf Club has seen tremendous growth,” said **David Stinson**, Director of Golf Operations.

“They have enhanced the vertical family memberships ensuring that parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren and spouses are all recognized with member privileges. Building family connectivity and the multigenerational opportunities at Palmetto Bluff is an important part of

why members choose their property, making their entire family feel welcomed and cared for is a key part of that for all the areas, particularly golf.”



Stintson



A home at 32 Gilded Street is in the West Wilson neighborhood of Palmetto Bluff. It has five bedrooms, is an easy walk to the golf club and lists for \$3.4 million. Photo/Palmetto Bluff.

According to their website, they have 24 homes and 20 homesites, with several of those being under contract. Prices range from the \$820,000 plus to nearly \$6 million.

PGA pros turned real estate pros

Dan Lorentz of The Boulevard Company began his golf career in 1998 as a PGA golf professional at [The Links at Stono Ferry](#) in Hollywood. The Links is a semi-private golf course that runs along the Intracoastal Waterway under canopied oak trees. The club has implemented new technology and safety protocols to include club cars with USB charging stations, contactless check-ins, online food ordering and golf safety dividers.



The Links at Stono Ferry is a premier semi-private golf escape. Set amidst South Carolina Lowcountry breezes from the Intracoastal Waterway and centuries-old live oaks, it is in Hollywood. Photo/Dan Lorentz, The Boulevard Company.

In 2004, Lorentz parlayed his experience into real estate sales and investments. He and Realtor and team member, **Haynes Johnson**, who was a golf pro at Patriots Point Links, (a Mount Pleasant public course on the edge of the Charleston Harbor) for two years are also involved in The First Tee of Charleston. Lorentz and Haynes are active with the Young Advisors Committee of the organization comprising young golf professionals who create events to fund The First Tee. Dedicated to teaching children life skills through the game of golf, it brings people together from all walks of life.

“The organization teaches them important life skills that can be learned from golf like confidence, perseverance, and sportsmanship,” said Lorentz.

Johnson said he has noticed an interest of younger golfers and he doesn’t think it’s going away post-pandemic.

“The pandemic definitely spurred an interest in golf, particularly amongst young people,” Johnson commented.

“There is a ‘resurgence’ in golf and



Lorentz



Johnson

local excitement in golf after the PGA Championship, more people than ever are interested in the game and in living in golf communities. We are so excited to see that. If you want to buy a home in a golf community, I'd advise you make sure that not only do you love the neighborhood, but that you enjoy the golf course as well."

Whether it's a golf-themed community or one near a golf course, Lorentz said that the demand for

these homes has spiked. "Buyers are looking for the perfect place to live and the ones with the best amenities usually go to the top of the list, especially outdoor amenities. Golf communities have realized a huge demand in the last 18 months and home prices have shot up. We had a mass influx of out-of-state buyers escaping states with COVID lockdowns. Our area being moderately temperate, being outside can be accomplished all year long. Supply and demand has created a large uptick in values that we don't see stopping anytime soon."



A lakefront home at 1512 Rivertowne Country Club Drive is within the Rivertowne neighborhood in Mount Pleasant. Rivertowne features Charleston's only Arnold Palmer Signature 18-hole golf course, situated among marshlands, with 13 holes along the Wando River and Horlbeck Creek. List price: \$844,900. Photo/The Boulevard Company.

Lorentz offered his opinion about some of the Lowcountry's courses. "The top public course to play in Charleston is The Links at Stono Ferry—it's challenging and the back 9 sits along the Stono River. It's an amazing neighborhood that offers great amenities and is one of the very few equestrian friendly neighborhoods. Some of the other top courses and neighborhoods would be Rivertowne, Dunes West and Charleston National in Mount Pleasant. We sell quite a few homes in these communities and they all have challenging golf courses and great amenities."

Lorentz said there aren't as many private course options in Charleston, but he lists one of the "most prized" as Daniel Island Course on Daniel Island, The County Club of Charleston as a "great old-style golf course in the middle of James Island," and Briars Creek, a private golf community on Johns Island— "very exclusive with only a handful of lots or homes available."



The number of female golfers (adult and junior) rose by approximately 450,000 in 2020. 24% of on course golfers are women. Photo/The Cliffs.

“Private clubs all have an initiation fee to join which can range from \$60,000 plus and most are on a waiting list currently, due to the golf COVID boom. Golf was one of the safe outdoor activities that most folks took advantage of,” he said.

Lakes and mountain golfing



South Carolina's only true mountaintop golf course is at The Cliffs. The Glassy course sits more than 3,000 feet above sea level, offering majestic views. This course has been ranked fourth most scenic in the nation, behind only Cypress Point, Pebble Beach and Augusta National and when you arrive at the signature 13th hole, you'll see why. Photo/The Cliffs.

For those interested in a main or second home in a lake or mountain setting, [The Cliffs](#) is a collection of seven private communities in the Western Carolina Mountains. There are seven award-winning courses, with two of them by Jack Nicklaus, two by Tom Fazio and Gary Player links design and classics by Jackson & Wright. A membership at The Cliffs allows one a "passport" to all seven. Dubbed "Best Residential Courses by Golf Week, "Best Golf Communities to Live in North America" by Golf Magazine and the "Happiest Community in America" by Real Estate Scorecard, The Cliffs are a golf mecca (and then some). South Street Partners acquired The Cliffs in 2019.

"There is such a breath of options for all levels of players," said **Rob Duckett**, President of The Cliffs. "There are kid-friendly courses, camps, special events, golf camps and Junior Championships give young golfers the chance to earn bragging rights throughout the year."

Keowee Falls, Keowee Springs and Keowee Vineyards are in the South Carolina Mountains, 20 to 30-minute drives from Clemson. The Cliffs at Glassy, The Cliffs at Mountain Park and The Cliffs Valley are 25 to 50-minute drives from Greenville. The Cliffs at Walnut Cove is a 15-minute drive to Asheville. Homes range in price from \$500,000 to \$6 million plus. Homesites begin at \$125,000.



Duckett



The Cliffs at Keowee Vineyards blends dazzling mountain vistas with exhilarating lakeside living. There is an 18-hole Tom Fazio golf course, park, trails and restaurant along the lake's picturesque lakefront. This is one of The Cliffs' most spectacular clubs, home to an equestrian center, full-service marina and stunning clubhouse. Photo/The Cliffs.

These communities realized an increase of golf participation during 2020. Walnut Cove rose to 20,424 (from 16,424 in 2019); Mountain Park went from 18,131 in 2019 to 21,758; and Keowee Springs jumped from 11,328 in 2019 to 15,184 in 2020. All are on track to maintain and/or exceed those numbers into 2021.

“No matter the age of skill, making golf fun is The Cliffs’ mantra,” said Duckett.

“Programming is robust across the clubs. Everywhere around our seven courses, our golf professionals share their love of the game with you.”

2020 golf stats

- 36.9 million (ages 6 and up) played golf on-course and off course.
- 3 million played on a golf course for the first time (a record from previous 7 years).
- 5.9 million (18-34-year-olds) are one of the sport’s biggest customer age segments.
- Golf is more diverse than ever -- 3.1 million juniors played golf on a course, with 34 percent of them being girls compared to 15 percent in 2000. More than one quarter are non-Caucasian.
- There were 6 million female on-course golfers (adult and junior) in 2020 – approximately 450,000 more than the previous year.
- 502 million rounds were played on courses throughout the U.S. in 2020, an increase of nearly 14 percent, even though more than half of the 16,000 plus courses in the country were temporarily closed due to COVID.
- Golfers played an average of 20 rounds in 2020.
- 6.4 million millennials play 93 million rounds each year and spend about \$5 billion annually on golf.

- South Carolina has a \$2.3 billion total economic output, with \$1.4 billion golf economic output, which translates to \$713 million total wages, 30,938 total jobs and 375 golf courses.

Sources: National Golf Foundation and We Are Golf

Lowcountry Golf Courses

1. Dunes West, public/semi-private, Mt Pleasant
2. Snee Farms, public/semi-private, Mt Pleasant
3. Charleston National, public/semi-private, Mt Pleasant
4. Rivertowne Country Club, public/semi-private, Mt Pleasant
5. Patriots Point Links on Charleston Harbor, public/semi-private, Mt Pleasant
6. Isle of Palms, Wild Dunes Harbour Course and Wild Dunes Links Course, private
7. Bulls Bay, Awendaw, private
8. Daniel Island Club, private
9. Kiawah Island Golf Resort, public/semi-private
10. The Ocean Course, public/semi-private, Kiawah
11. Turtle Point, public/semi-private, Kiawah
12. Cougar Point, public/semi-private, Kiawah
13. Osprey Point, public/semi-private, Kiawah
14. Oak Point, public/semi-private, Kiawah
15. Kiawah Island Club, private
16. Seabrook Island, private

17. Ocean Winds, private, Seabrook
18. County Club of Charleston, private, James Island
19. City of Charleston Municipal, public, James Island
20. The Links at Stono Ferry, public/semi-private, Hollywood
21. Briars Creek, Private, Johns Island
22. Legend Oaks, public/semi-private, Summerville
23. Summerville Country Club, public/semi-private
24. The Club at Pine Forest, public/semi-private, Summerville
25. Golf Club at Wescott, public/semi-private, Summerville
26. Yeamans Hall, private, Hanahan
27. Shadowmoss Plantation Golf Club, public/semi-private, West Ashley
28. Coosaw Country Club, public/semi-private, North Charleston
29. Crowfield Golf Club, public/semi-private, Goose Creek

Source: Dan Lorentz and Haynes Johnson