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Is golfing allowed amid Colorado coronavirus stay-at-home orders? Golfers find there's no uniform answer

Differing interpretations of Gov. Polis' statewide order have courses split on what to do



Aaron Ontiveroz, The Denver Post

Golfers swing away from the driving range tee box at Saddleback Golf Course on Tuesday, March 31, 2020. Saddleback has remained open despite closures to many other businesses. The belief is that golf is already a sports that practices social distancing. Management has further aided in limiting contact by raising the cups, so balls do not go in the hole as well as not giving out buckets for balls on the driving range, rather, stacking the balls in pyramids.

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Colorado golfers itching to break quarantine during the coronavirus pandemic face uncertainty as there are no clear-cut guidelines on whether the sport is an approved outdoor activity or prohibited non-essential business.

Many of the state's top privately-owned clubs — such as Colorado National (Erie), Pelican Lakes (Windsor), Saddleback (Longmont) and TPC Colorado (Berthoud) — have remained open with CDC-recommended social distancing policies in place. But around 70 golf courses in the state were closed as of late last week, according to the Colorado Golf Course Coalition website, including all City and County of Denver public courses.

Even those who intend to play are wondering if they should be.

Danny Lynch, 36, is a Denver native and avid golfer who plays upward of 100 rounds per year at courses across the state. He made plans to golf this week with his uncle and cousin at Riverdale Dunes in Brighton, but with his seven years of prior experience working in health care, he is mindful of what is at stake.

“I’m craving golf at all times,” Lynch said. “It’s my mental outlet and what I do to not think of reality for several hours. You don’t worry about anything but hitting your next shot. That seems even more important now, but that’s what makes this such a huge conundrum for me.

“Is it selfish? Or is playing the right thing for me to do mentally?”



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A pyramid of balls being used in place of a handheld bucket of balls at the driving range of Saddleback Golf Club on Tuesday, March 31, 2020.

The split between open and closed Colorado golf courses exists due to differing interpretations of Gov. Jared Polis' statewide stay-at-home order, which fails to specifically address golf. The order broadly maintains that outdoor activities including but not limited to "walking, hiking, nordic skiing, snowshoeing, biking or running" are allowed if you "maintain at least a six-foot distance from other individuals."

Other states have been more clear defining golf within the pandemic. Arizona deemed the operation of its clubs an essential business. Pennsylvania recently took steps to close its last remaining open golf courses. Ohio reversed course, amended its initial order, and later included golf as approved outdoor recreation.

So, what does that mean for golf in Colorado?

A Polis spokesperson provided the following statement to The Denver Post: "Recreation is only allowed if it can be done in compliance with social distancing requirements, meaning most operations at any private (golf) club would be closed or severely restricted. It's not about what you can get away with, it's about protecting your friends, family and community."

Ed Mate, executive director of the Colorado Golf Coalition, spent the past few days in regular contact with golf operators across the state. He has observed that most public clubs still open are privately owned. Courses managed by municipalities or parks and recreation districts are more likely to be closed.

A dozen states have ordered temporary closures of all golf facilities, per the National Golf Foundation. The lack of specific direction from Gov. Polis for how golf operators should proceed in Colorado, though, has created a healthy debate within the industry about whether to keep operating.

“The bottom line is that it is going to be up to each golf course to make a determination,” Mate said.



Aaron Ontiveroz, The Denver Post

A man drives a golf cart on the front nine at Saddleback Golf Club on Tuesday,

The Saddleback Golf Club in Firestone is among the Colorado courses that did not shut down amid county and statewide stay-at-home orders. Whitey O'Malley, the club's owner, instead altered his business plan. O'Malley's restrictions mirror many other Colorado golf courses contacted by The Post which remain operational.

Golfers who play Saddleback must reserve tee times online or by phone with a virtual check-in. Public spaces where people typically gather — the pro shop, restaurant seating, etc. — are off-limits. Carts are available for singles only (unless sheltering with a fellow rider) and are immediately sanitized after use. Cups in holes are turned upside down so golfers avoid the flagstick and digging for balls.

“We essentially have the same number of touches as when you go out for a walk around the block,” O'Malley said. “Four or five times a day, we'll have groups standing next to each other and through our PA system we ask them to spread apart, even if they're sheltering together, because not everyone else knows that.”

The greens and fairways at Colorado Golf Club in Parker are empty, however. It closed when Tri-County enacted its initial shelter-in-place order, which named golf specifically as a banned activity, and then CGC declined to reopen days later when the governor's order took precedence — without mentioning golf.

“It left a real question, that by its omission, was golf exempt? You're flying blind,” said Tom Farrell, a CGC spokesman. “The main concern for us and any facility is the health of its members, staff and society in Colorado. What we've been seeking is a clarification. All the places that have opened have done so with strict social distancing guidelines. But is that enough?”

“Speaking for Colorado Golf Club, we don't want to be out there making our own policies.”

There is one area where all state golf operators can agree. They are thankful Polis is allowing courses to continue maintaining their properties through the pandemic — even if closed to play. It means that Colorado's 242 golf courses spanning nearly 20,000 acres of irrigated turfgrass will not be overgrown when golfers return to play.

Meanwhile, the industry faces an uncertain economic future.

The Colorado Tourism Office reported last fall that “resort/golf trips” in 2018 accounted for the second-highest revenue behind only ski/snowboard trips. April is early on the Colorado golf calendar, but the pressure to resume business operations in typically busy summer months will certainly increase.

“We're entering a critical month when it comes to the financial viability of our golf facilities,” Mate said. “The longer golf is not allowed, the bigger the impact is going to be. The coalition shares that concern, but obviously, we want to be a part of the solution. This is a time to be citizens first and golfers second.”



Aaron Ontiveroz, The Denver Post

A golfer taps into an elevated cup on the 18th green at Saddleback Golf Club on Tuesday, March 31, 2020.

Lynch, the links-crazed Denver resident grappling with the decision to golf, is hopeful an eventual slowdown of coronavirus will bring normalcy back to his favorite hobby. Golf, by design, forces players to respect a competitor's personal space.

Someday, it might serve as the perfect antidote for the pandemic blues.

"With the social distancing almost built-in, I could see golf become even more popular," Lynch said. "Another thing that I'm excited about is that the courses will be in the best shape they've ever been. Nobody is hardly playing.

"I can't wait to see what they look like."

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