

Golf Range



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M A G A Z I N E

PRACTICE • TEACHING • FITTING • MARKETING

Time to Add an Academy Building?

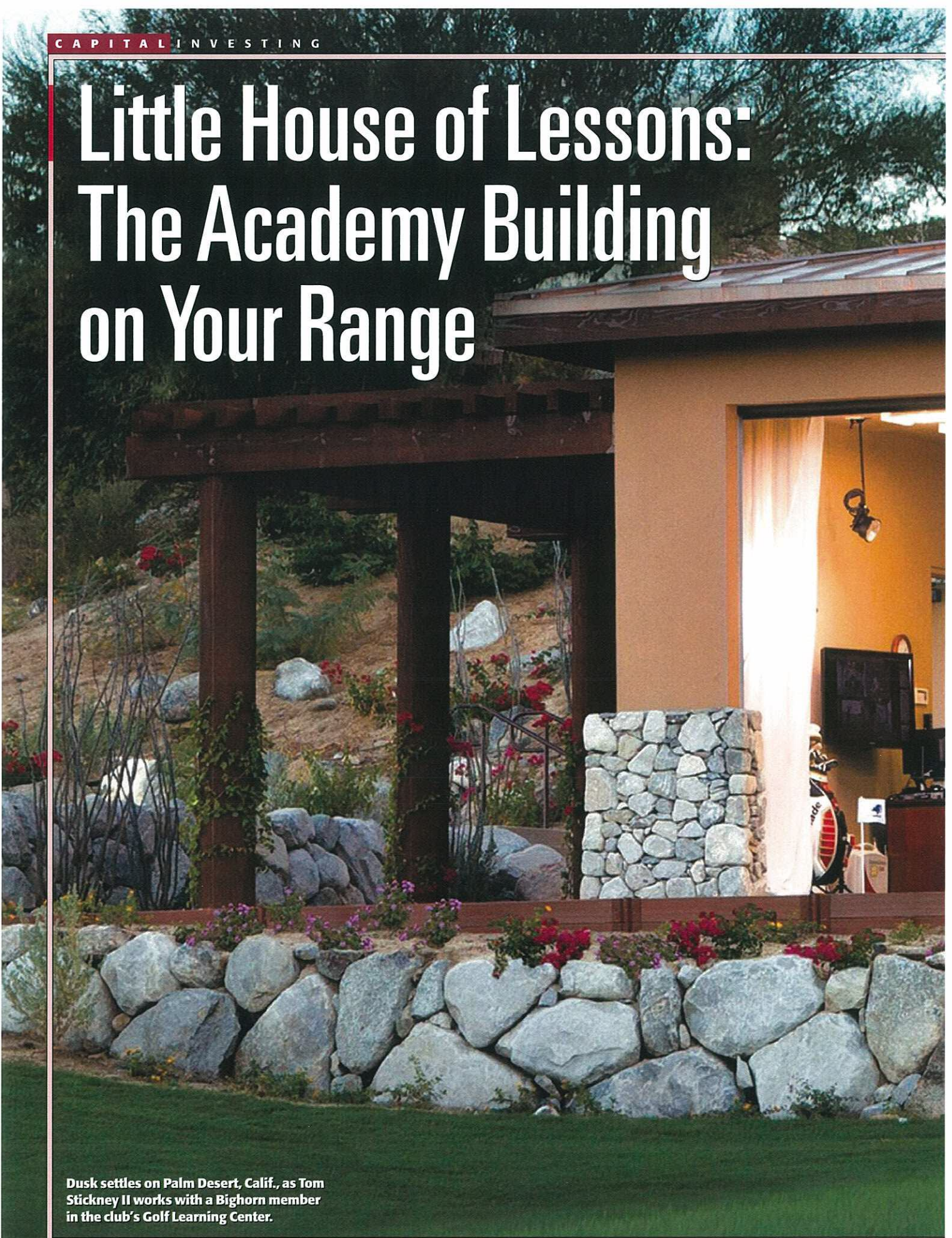
Survey Data Helps Clubs and Teachers Make the Call



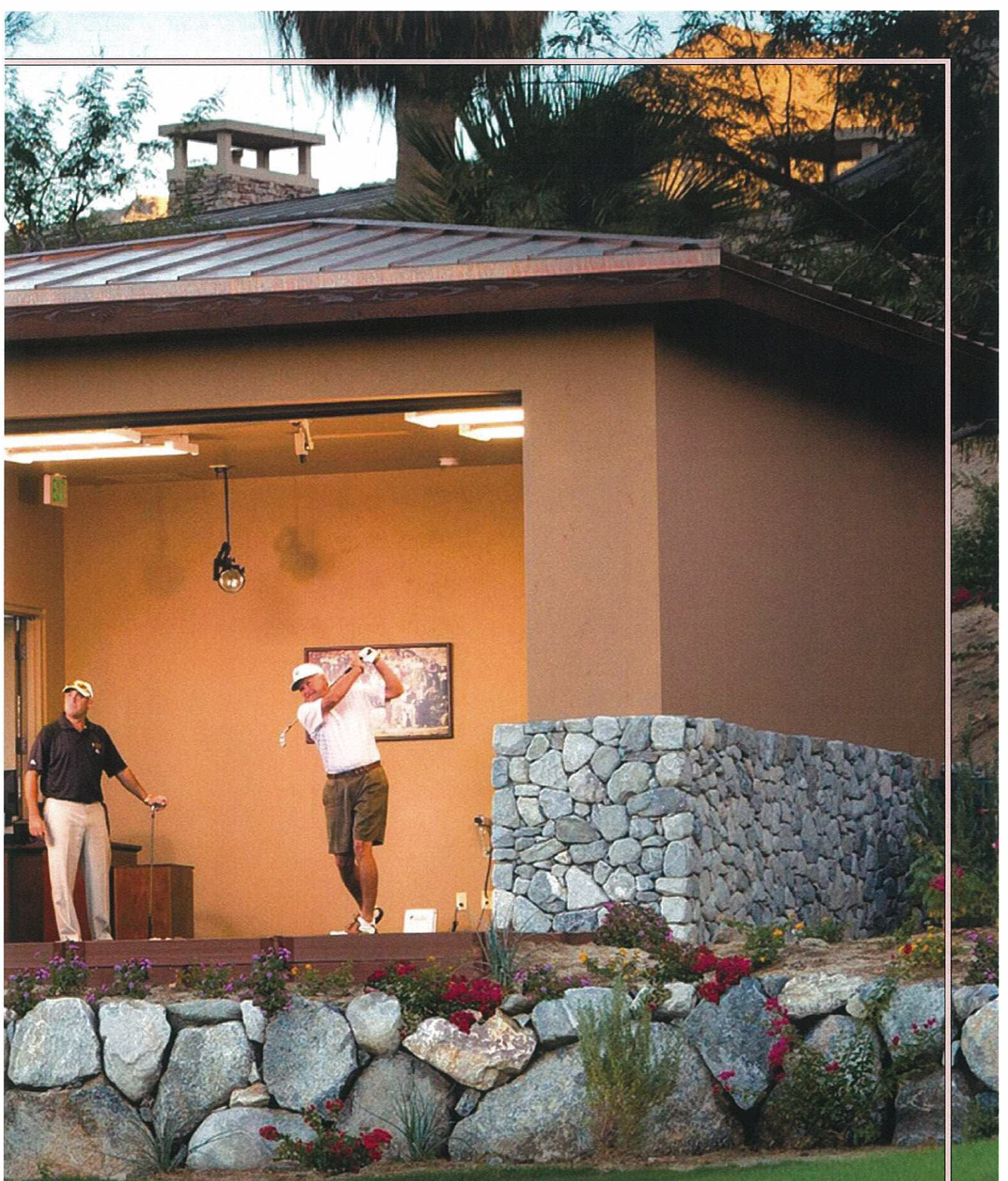
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- Growing Golf the TGA Way
- California Innovator: Kris Moe
- New Look at Lyman Orchards

Little House of Lessons: The Academy Building on Your Range



Dusk settles on Palm Desert, Calif., as Tom Stickney II works with a Bighorn member in the club's Golf Learning Center.



As your golf instruction program grows and develops, the question of whether to construct a teaching building looms. Here's help in planning, preparing—and deciding whether to green-light the project. BY DAVID GOULD



Barnboard walls and historic photos decorate Nantucket Golf Club's teaching center. Inset photo shows building exterior.

Scottish immigrant golf professionals at America's first clubs set up shop in small outbuildings. It went against social norms to have them use the actual clubhouse. Flash forward 100 years and we find that an outbuilding of his own is the dream of many a teaching professional. "Academy buildings" or "instruction buildings," whatever your preferred term, are the mark of a lessons-practice-clubfitting program to be reckoned with. They provide protected hitting space, a studio for all the latest tech tools and a comfortable "hangout" atmosphere for students. Mostly they make a powerful statement about game-improvement being a top priority at that particular club or course.

Sleepy Hollow Country Club in Scarborough, N.Y. made range improvements in the early 1990s that left Jim McLean, then the director of golf at the club, ensconced in an academy building that did much to help McLean develop as an instructor. At the time he and fellow PGA Professional Carl Welty were amassing one of the country's most complete video libraries of tour-player golf swings. The tapes were used by McLean as

research for books and articles as well as for everyday teaching. His small but sturdy building at the far end of the Sleepy Hollow range meanwhile became a shrine of sorts to outstanding golf swings—portrayed in large image sequences on its walls. A visitor knew he was someplace where skills were being honed and handicaps lowered.

In the past 15 years, many golf facilities have either added academy build-

ings to their existing practice grounds or included them in master plans as prime amenities to draw members and students. Write-in comments from a recent survey by The Proponent Group, a web-based association of instructors, included the assertion that "a teaching facility is the best tool for legitimizing any instruction program." Members of the organization (formerly the Instructor Division of GolfBusinessNetwork) are all serious, full-time teaching professionals known for investing in their craft and skills and commanding top-of-market fees. In other words, they know what can put a program over the top.

Not every Proponent Group member is located at a high-end club or resort, however—a few are on their own, creating and perhaps funding their own infrastructure. This diversity helps explain the range of dollar amounts given in response to the question of how much it costs to add one of these swing-doctor's-offices to a range that lacks one. The average amount



A wood-burning stove sets the tone for Lou Guzzi's academy building at Talamore Country Club.

spent was \$263,088, about the price of a three-bedroom ranch home in a nice neighborhood. The median cost was significantly lower at \$180,000—and one of these dedicated teachers actually got a roof over his or her head at the end of the range for just \$3,500. It's assumed that some on-staff labor was used in that case. The highest amount invested to create an academy building by a member of that group was a cool \$1 million.

To furnish these fancy practice huts required \$28,789 as an average spend, just \$8,000 as the median amount. One Proponent Group member tricked out his building with furnishings and décor costing an estimated \$200,000. At the Talamore Country Club in Ambler, Pa., PGA Director of Instruction Lou Guzzi got very serious about décor, setting the mood with a four-wall mural so visually dramatic it seems like a ball might fly out of it. Guzzi also displays his vast library of instruction books inside his 1,200-square-foot building. "I really want our studio to feel academic," he has said, asserting that credibility comes in the details of a facility like this, not just the broad strokes.

For what was spent by the Proponent Group professionals, or their clubs, the practice space created is still fairly modest in size. Some 81 percent of those surveyed produced a building with either one, two or three indoor hitting bays, most of them fronted with

Surveyed teaching professionals put the median cost of an academy building at **\$180,000, plus tech gear and furnishings.**

roll-up garage doors that open to the range. Average dimension of a hitting bay is listed in the survey report at 22 feet deep by 17 feet wide. Along with the building comes a need for all the techno-toys a modern teaching professional might need, from motion vests

to shot analyzers and big screens where all the captured data can be presented. According to the survey, "teaching technology and computers" were installed at an average cost of \$26,071—though again the median amount spent was down at \$15,000.

If your marketing skills are way above average, there's at least a possibility that some or all of this outlay could be offset by a naming-rights arrangement of sorts, such as major-league stadiums enjoy. Almost one in 10 of these academy buildings was underwritten by corporate sponsorships. Meanwhile, there is one vendor in the marketplace offering turnkey design and construction of exactly this type of facility. On the website for Power Golf Group (www.powergolfgroup.com), you can view some interesting and impressive off-the-shelf designs for academy buildings that would be simple enough to get price estimates on. Power Golf Group, allied now with the respected Midwestern specialty company, Morton Buildings, promotes the fact that it has 54 years of golf-industry service and PGA Professionals on the design team for its academy structures.

Not surprisingly, positive results for these professionals' instruction business were revealed, once the buildings were completed and members or customers began flowing in. Asked to provide the percentage increase in their lesson volume, one in five respondents said it had jumped by at least 50 percent. There was a lesson-volume pickup of between 31 and 50 percent for 15 percent of respondents. The rest of the sampling reported volume upticks of lesser amounts, except for a small minority whose business stayed the same.

There is a host of questions to be asked by any course owner or club membership planning to construct one of these slice-cure casitas at the back of the range. First off, does it have to be there? Many are, but it's not a necessity and perhaps not even the most convenient or functional place for an academy building. Factored into that consideration are any possible ancillary uses that might be planned for the facility you build. At

Annandale Golf Club, a PGA Tour stop, the new teaching/learning building doubles as a halfwayhouse, generating ancillary revenue through food-beverage sales.

A unique golf complex in Gahanna, Ohio with the colorful name, The Golf Depot, just created a heated teaching/learning center with a 55-seat pavilion adjoining it, intended for relaxing with refreshments after one's round, lesson or clinic. The 2,700-square-foot structure features rolling track doors and thermoplastic polymer windbreaks to make it a year-round usable building. The Golf Depot has run a "pre-construction special" on passes for single users, couples, juniors and families. That's a natural promotion to take advantage of the anticipation that does tend to develop around these academy buildings—they are still new and uncommon enough that a true buzz (and a revenue boost while-they-wait) can be built around them.

The PGA Professionals who provided quantitative data for that Proponent Group survey also volunteered



Golfers at Eagle Springs in Colorado enjoy a compact, comfortable building called The Swing Studio.

notes and suggestions aimed at anyone in the planning stages of a project like this. Based on their experience with the finished product, many of them emphasized the need for width, height

and depth of the hitting space beyond what might seem reasonable on first blush. "The larger the hitting area the better, so that students feel they can swing freely," one respondent specified. The write-in comments also suggested that planners "include a sitting area with plenty of space adjacent to hitting bays" and "design a good-sized storage area to keep training equipment out of sight."

Skylights, a restroom and a bay devoted to putting practice were other items from the if-we-had-it-to-over-again department. One professional said in hindsight: "We would build a multiple-level facility--upstairs for office space and downstairs for teaching." Another advised careful study of sun angles, especially early and late in the day, before finalizing the site for your academy building.

While addition of these structures is increasingly common, it's not yet a full-blown fad, which is surely a good thing. To construct, furnish and equip a special building for instruction and clubfitting is just part of the project—after that your operation has to be able to staff, maintain and secure it. Adding an amenity like this does show that you're ultra-serious about instruction and fitting, so be sure you really are before making the big commitment. ■

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