



Golfsmith and other golf retailers growing in Northeast Ohio

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By **Janet H. Cho, The Plain Dealer**

WARRENSVILLE HEIGHTS, Ohio - A Texas golf chain sees our region as the perfect place to open more stores, but a retail expert wonders if there is enough of a market to support that growth.

Golfsmith International Holdings Inc. says the affluence and enthusiasm of local golfers, as well as **the abundance of area golf courses**, puts Northeast Ohio "in the top three or four under-served markets" for golf retail shops.

"Based on the number of courses, the number of players, the number of golf magazine subscribers, the number of rounds being played in Cleveland, and the number of golf specialty retailers,

Cleveland does not have the choices that you have in other parts of the country," said Marty Hanaka, chairman and chief executive of **Golfsmith**, via phone from Austin, Texas.

The chain, which already has **two stores in Columbus**, is opening its 86th store in Warrensville Heights **on Friday** and is looking next at Cincinnati. Hanaka wants to open two more stores here, possibly in Westlake and Akron.

"We're looking throughout the Midwest, but Ohio is a place we'd like to set up camp," he said. Golfsmith plans to open 10 stores this year and move four others into larger digs, for a total of 90 stores nationwide.

But retail analyst Robert Antall, who calls himself a serious golfer for the past 54



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Chuck Stefano of Lyndhurst tries out the putting green in the middle of the Golfsmith store in Warrensville Heights. The \$2 million store is the only one in the 86-store chain with four high-tech golf simulators, along the wall behind him, where shoppers can drive before they buy.



years, expressed doubts about the idea of opening more stores, pointing out that the number of golfers nationwide has fallen.

"Back in the '90s, virtually everyone was predicting a boom in golf, and virtually everyone was wrong," said Antall, managing partner of **Consumer Centric Consulting LLC** in Shaker Heights.

"The boom never materialized, and we have had declines in golfers for most of the last 10-plus years," from 27.1 million in 2009 to 26.1 million in 2010, what the **National Golf Foundation** called the third straight annual drop.

"As a result many golf retailers, golf manufacturers, and some golf courses went bankrupt in the last decade," he said.

"I see nothing to indicate golf has picked up substantially other than maybe a recent small rebound that all retailers are experiencing as a result of economic improvement."

In Northeast Ohio, besides the **Golf Galaxy stores** in Mayfield Heights, Akron and North Olmsted, "there are probably 50-plus pro shops and a half dozen **Dick's (Sporting Goods)** and **Sports Authorities**," he said. "The competition is fierce."

But Golfsmith isn't the only local golf retailer looking to buck the trend.

Louis Rittberger, owner of **Stinger Tees Inc.** in Warrensville Heights, expects sales to grow 30 percent to 40 percent this year.

Stinger Tees makes and distributes specialized thin bamboo tees that it says help balls go higher and faster for longer, straighter drives. Its tees are sold at golf courses, country clubs, sporting goods stores and golf stores like Golfsmith.

"Business is really booming right now," because **nicer weather lifted the entire industry**, Rittberger said.



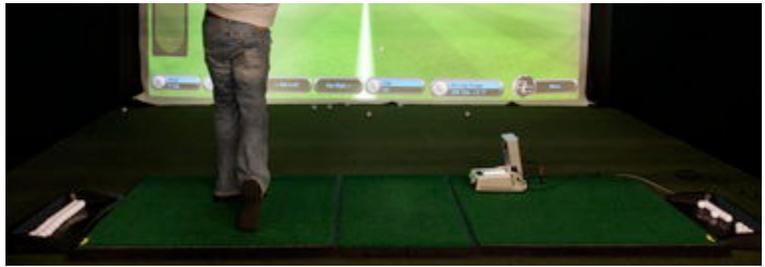
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Golfsmith store associate Shawn Inmon chats with customer Tom Babinski of North Royalton in front of the wall of irons that greets customers who walk into the Warrensville Heights store. Even though the store doesn't officially open until Friday, customers have been coming in to browse - and buy - since April 30.



"We followed the worst weather year with the best spring of all time, and there's a lot of pent-up demand. People are also having a little more faith in the economy and willing to spend a bit more as well."



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Eddie Lynch of Willoughby tries out one of the \$25,000 golf simulators at the new Golfsmith store in Warrensville Heights on Tuesday. The Austin, Texas, retailer sees the potential for two more stores in Northeast Ohio, saying there aren't enough retail choices for all the golfers here.

Irene Dooley, who opened **Girls Got Swing**, a Rocky River boutique specializing in women's golf and resort wear, shoes, accessories, golf bags, golf purses, hats and outerwear, says her customers drive in from Vermillion to Chagrin Falls.

"We're very optimistic, thrilled actually," she said. "We're really looking forward to this year, because people just want to make up for lost time. They're chomping at the bit to get out there, that's how golfers are."

Sales at her store, which she owns with her husband, Terry, are 20 percent higher than they were this time last year, with customer traffic so brisk that they're open seven days a week.

"I buy specifically for my customers, and we go from size 0 to 22, with a nicer variety of golf shoes, and the women appreciate it," she said.

She said she rings up sales not only during Ohio's golf season, but throughout the year, because her customers come in to shop before going on golf vacations to Florida or the Southwest.

Dooley said that **The 19th Hole Magazine** says that "40 percent of new golfers are women, and that women are the fastest-growing segment of the market."

Unlike men who can shop online, "women are more tactile than men, and they care more about fit and style," she said.

"For women, if you look good, you feel good, and if you feel good when you're out on the course, you play well."

Hanaka said that Golfsmith is investing more than \$2 million to lease, staff and equip the 20,000-square-foot Warrensville Heights store - the only one in the chain with four high-tech, \$25,000 hitting bays where golfers can try out different clubs before they buy.

It also has a custom-fit and repair workshop and a putting green in the middle of the store.

"I think golf's on the rebound, and this is definitely **a strong community for golf**," said Daryl George, general manager of the store, pointing out the customers streaming in before the store's official opening on Friday.

Besides moving George here from Memphis, the store also hired 24 people locally.

Tom Kenney of Parma stopped by on Tuesday to look for a new driver.

"I need something to give me some distance, because I'm getting too old," he joked, taking a few swings at the simulator as salesman Walt Klepac studied his stroke.

Trummie Hudson of Berea said that based on what he's seen as a golf pro at both **Mallard Creek** and **Royal Crest Golf Courses** in Columbia Station, "I do think golf is coming back."

Karen Shiffler of Chardon agreed that the area needs more golf stores.

"I just wish there were more options in the Cleveland area for women who golf," she said, carrying some outfits to the Golfsmith fitting room.

"A lot of (golf) places won't come to Northeast Ohio, because it's such a short season, but there are a lot of golfers here."

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