

Golf team can practice, rain or shine

The Doppler radar system inside the Ragin' Cajuns golf team's new practice and instructional complex tracks golf balls, not thunderstorms. "It computes how far a ball carried, how far it rolled, spin rate, launch angle, club speed, ball speed. It's incredible," said golf head coach Theo Sliman.

The system is just one of several high-tech tools at the disposal of coaches and golfers at the 4,000-square-foot complex. The facility consists of adjoining 2,000-square-foot buildings at Oakbourne Country Club, about 3 miles from campus.

The \$850,000 complex was built this past summer as part of the Athletics Department Facilities Master Plan. It was funded through donations, including several large contributions made through the Vermilion Links Club, a recently formed booster organization.

One building contains an indoor practice facility. Its three hitting bays have huge metal doors that open onto a hilly sweep of closely-cropped grass dotted with golf holes and sand traps. UL Lafayette players use two of the bays; Oakbourne golf pros teach lessons in the other.

Golfers stand at tee boxes inside the covered bays and drive onto the practice range. Swings are evaluated with video equipment that beams images to 55-inch TV screens. Coaches monitor imperfections in stance and swing, thanks to software that measures, in degrees, almost imperceptible flaws that impact driving distance and accuracy.

The same goes for putts that, when tapped across a floor carpeted with artificial turf, can be analyzed by a high-tech device. Strokes can be scrutinized, with attention to club angles and ball paths.

Beyond the pluses for players, the technology often supports coaches. Video, Sliman reasons, is like a photo: it never lies.

"As a confident, high-level player, you can sometimes have

doubts about instruction, about what someone's saying you need to do to improve. This eliminates doubt," he said.

The facility also eliminates loss of practice time for Ragin' Cajun golfers when weather is rainy or cold. The metal doors of the hitting bays can be pulled down and closed to keep the bays warm and dry. Those doors don't restrict teeing off.

When they're closed, golfers smash drives into thick, mesh nets strung across the front of the bays like large curtains. The nets stop golf balls, which slide gently to the floor.

"This facility enables us to practice 365 days a year if we want to. Mother Nature can't stop us," Sliman said.

Ragnar Gardarsson, a member of the 2016-17 golf team, will graduate from UL Lafayette with a bachelor's degree in mathematics in December. Until then, he's squeezing as much practice time from the complex as possible.

Technology has enabled him to make several recent tweaks to his game, including

improvements to his "attack angle" on drives.

"This helps a lot. If we are struggling with anything, the equipment inside the building lets us see what adjustments we need to make," Gardarsson said. That's especially beneficial since he's prepping to become a professional golfer.

The golf complex's other building houses a coaches' office, a player's lounge, a locker room, and a study hall.

Most important, this new complex provides a home for Ragin' Cajun golfers.

Although team members have long practiced at Oakbourne, they had no roof over their heads before the complex's completion. They lugged bags loaded with clubs to and from their vehicles every day.

With access to a world-class facility, they can store gear, shower after practice or concentrate on homework.

"Now team members have a place where they can hang out and bond," Sliman said.



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