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Greener Golf

It is true to say that there is not a single aspect of our lives that remains untouched by the environmental concerns surrounding global warming. Even golf, a comparatively green pastime in every sense of the word, now needs to make a stand and help the planet. *Steve Newell* looks at the issue of green technologies in golf and focuses on SolarDrive, a company that has invented roof panels that convert daylight into sufficient energy to power golf carts for 36 holes a day, every day of the year.

History is full of innovators, inventors and pioneers – extraordinary men and women who pushed the boundaries of what was considered possible and changed the way we live. One of the great challenges for the clever people of the 21st century lies in discovering ways to harness green and renewable energy sources, thus reducing our collective carbon footprint.

Fundamental changes are a necessity, but how we collectively manage that process of change will ultimately determine its success rate. If you believe some recent studies, which are on the dark side of pessimistic, we would have to return to a way of life not seen since the Middle Ages for the planet's burgeoning population to succeed in meeting its CO2 emission output in 20 years' time. Call me a sceptic, but I don't envisage people in the developed world cruising to work on a horse and cart.

No, we're not about to give up such fundamental freedoms as our personal mobility. And besides, as much as I love our four-legged equine friends, I think we can safely assume that more comfortable, less odorous, solutions will come to our rescue.

As I said, this is what the clever people do!

To all intents and purposes such solutions already exist in the form of various green technologies. Some may need more development to increase efficiencies and meaningful output, but in time that will come. And they will fundamentally change the way we live; influencing the cars that we drive; the means by which we heat our homes and businesses...and yes, even the way we get around a golf course.

While in some countries golfers still very much prefer walking around a golf course, the fact is in others the golf cart is very much the done thing. And these carts use energy...a lot of it, in some cases.

One innovative Danish company is at the forefront of the drive to help golf go greener. The company is called SolarDrive and it has, in conjunction with a Hong Kong-based inventor, created a neat and highly efficient solar-cell roof panel that can be retro-fitted to any make of electric golf cart. The potential savings, not only in financial but environmental terms too, are hugely significant. Almost half-a-million carts are



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manufactured every year and of those 70 per cent are powered by electricity. SolarDrive estimates they might soon capture a large piece of that market.

That's not to mention the other 30 per cent of the carts manufactured in a year which are currently gasoline-driven. Their resistance to going electric has until now been largely based on the fear of electric carts 'running dry' halfway through a round of golf. SolarDrive overcomes that problem, so its reach has almost limitless potential.

Solar Panels are, of course, nothing new. But these are different. The functionality of SolarDrive's roof cells – in essence, the cleverness of the converter mechanism – is the key. It requires only daylight to generate its energy output, boosting battery life and powering a golf cart for more than 36 holes a day, every day of the year if the need is there.

It is not only green, it is also good business. Golf Clubs embracing SolarDrive roof panels would dramatically reduce electricity bills every year. Not only that, it virtually doubles the estimated life of a typical battery, which cost in the region of \$700 to \$1,000 a set/per cart. It also enables one cart to be rented out more times in a day, which further improves gross profit.

The US government is so impressed with this technology that it is leading the rest of the world in offering significant tax incentives to encourage developers and golf course owners to adopt solar cell roof panels in its fleet of golf carts. For instance, in Arizona there is a Federal Income Tax Credit of 20 per cent, plus a State Tax Credit of 30 per cent, effectively cutting in half the initial capital outlay.

And in California, one town council is considering allowing solar-powered golf carts to be used on the streets, instead of a car. The same council is also looking at offering tax incentives and rebates as a means of encouraging the use of such vehicles.

“Not only does it make sound business sense, but we think this type of technology sends out the right kind of strong environmental message,” says SolarDrive's Peter Randow. “We're lobbying other countries and hopefully more and more will follow the US lead.”

With or without government assistance, SolarDrive could completely revolutionise the golf cart industry, not least because it is not in direct competition with golf cart manufacturers; quite the opposite, in fact. SolarDrive wants to work *with* them. It could in effect operate in the golf cart market rather in the way that, say, 'intel inside' does in the computer hardware market, effectively applying its complementary technology across a whole range of leading brands.



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More than 90 per cent of the golf cart market is currently controlled by three major brands – Yamaha, E-Z-GO and Club Car – and the feedback from these companies has largely been positive. The key markets would be Asia, the Middle East, US and South Africa.

World No.3 and three-time major champion Ernie Els is already a keen supporter of these golf carts. SolarDrive-equipped golf carts were used at the Ernie Els Invitational in December at Fancourt in South Africa as well as at the opening of the Els Club Dubai.

With a blossoming golf course design business to his name, Els has been quick to see the tangible business and environmental sense in adopting SolarDrive technology in golf carts. “To be honest, I just don’t see any downside,” said Els. “With SolarDrive technology such as this, everyone benefits, obviously including the environment.”

No one should doubt the green credentials of today’s golf course architects, constructors and developers. In the last two decades the whole business has become increasingly environmentally friendly in all of its practices; from the planning and application stages, through to construction, maintenance and even the types of grasses used to seed the tees, fairways and greens. “We always need to be very conscious that we leave a soft footprint on the landscape,” says Els.

Nothing leaves a softer footprint, so to speak, than a solar-cell powered golf cart. Soon, then, it seems we will be able to proclaim that the game of golf really is as green as it looks.

(1,166 words)