

By Gene Yasuda

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For the third consecutive year, the number of golfers in the U.S. declined, falling 3.6 percent to 26.1 million in 2010, according to the National Golf Foundation.

The slide, from 27.1 million golfers in 2009, wasn't unexpected in light of the heavy toll the recession has had on the sport and the economy in general.

The silver lining, if any, according to NGF officials, is that the participation falloff is more linked to financial pressures rather than golf losing popularity among consumers.

"Multiple NGF studies of golfers since 2008 would attribute the gradual decline in golfers and rounds primarily to the impact of lower job security and concern over personal finances, not waning appeal for the game," said Joe Beditz, NGF president and CEO.

The NGF supported that conclusion by citing golf's continuing ability to attract "new" participants – in 2010 a total of 3.6 million, including 1.5 million first-time beginners and 2.1 million returning former golfers.

That gain, however, was negated by the loss of 4.6 million golfers who played in 2009 but not in 2010. According to the NGF, the number of new golfers held steady while the number of those who left the game decreased significantly. In recent years, golf industry leaders have been emphasizing improving the retention of golfers.

For all their efforts, though, the downward trend of participation remains a major concern. By comparison, the number of golfers in the U.S. in 2000 and 2005 was 28.8 million and 30 million, respectively.

Among the other findings:

- The number of "core" golfers (eight or more rounds annually) dropped to 14.8 million – down 3.6 percent from 15.3 million in 2009.
- "Occasional" golfers suffered a similar decline: a drop of 3.7 percent to 11.3 million from 11.8 million in 2009.
- The number of rounds played in 2010 was 475 million, down 2.3 percent from 486 million in the previous year. (By comparison, rounds played in 2000 and 2005 was 518 million and 500 million, respectively.)

The participation study defines a golfer as a person, age 6 or older, who plays at least one round of golf in a given year. Its results are "derived from a multi-sport study of 40,000 Americans, executed in conjunction with the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association," the NGF stated.