

SOUND & COUNTRY

MAY 2021

Green with envy

Lushly landscaped and
covet-worthy gardens

Day-trippin'

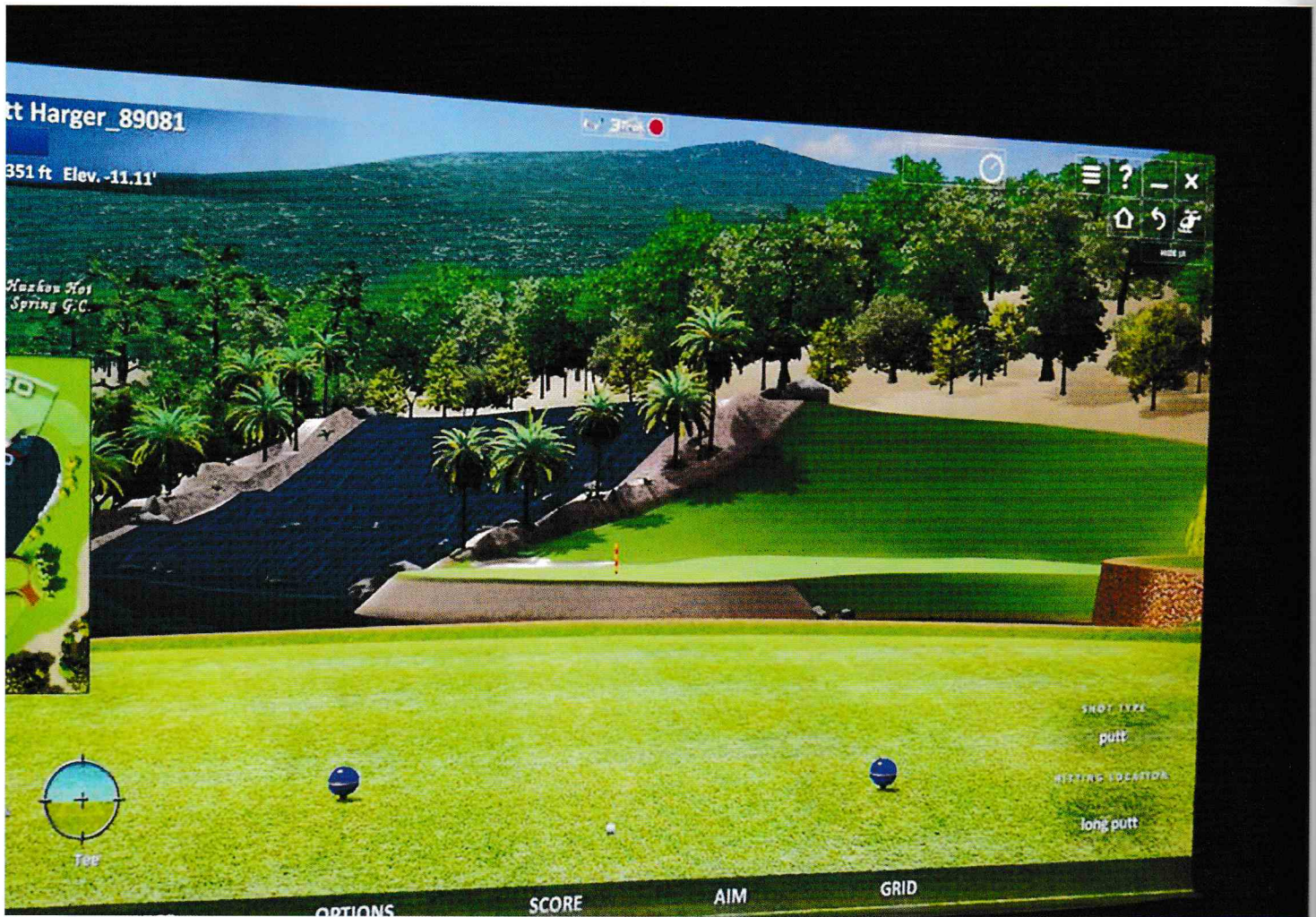
Experience all the
"Lymes" have to offer

Indulgences

Aren't we all due some pampering?

Whodunit?

A "murder mystery"
is afoot in Mystic



Hitting the links

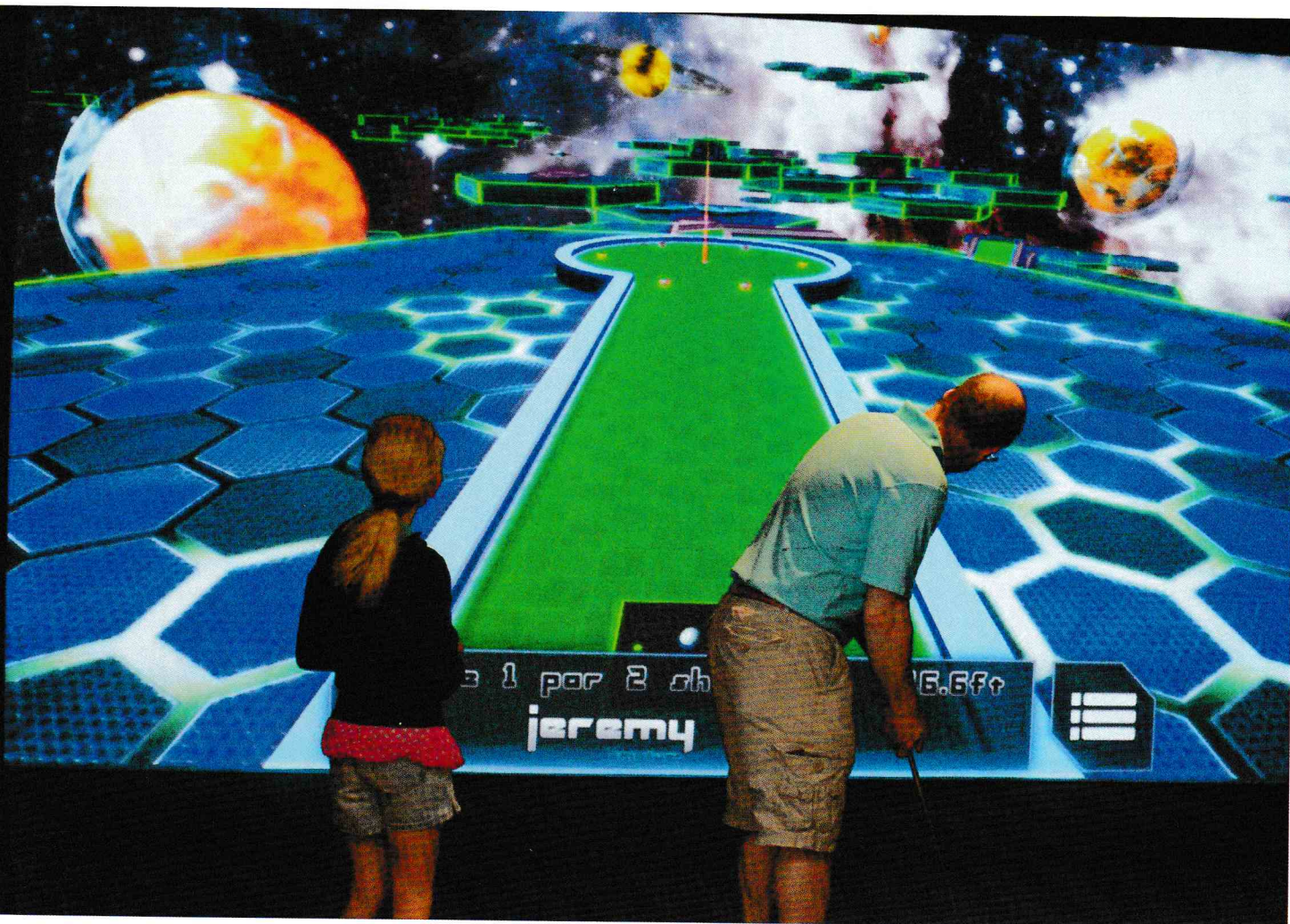
Play world-famous golf courses without leaving Connecticut

Story by Traci Neal ~ Photos courtesy of the Essex Indoor Golf Center

As Scott and Cheryl Harger planned the opening of their indoor golf business last spring, mid-pandemic and despite statewide COVID closures, they pressed on. Less than a year out from their June 2020 opening, Cheryl Harger says, Essex Indoor Golf Center has become well-known to families, golf leagues and mini-golfers alike who play, learn and train on dozens of world-famous virtual courses. "A pandemic is not what we had planned," recalls Cheryl Harger, an accountant who manages the office side of the business, doing the books, marketing and

hiring for the center. "It was a slow start but come December, once the weather turned and word started getting out, we've been really busy and pleasantly surprised." Inside the 100-year-old former warehouse space at 23 Saybrook Road in Essex, the COVID-safe facility is brightly lit, with high ceilings and open space to allow for proper social distancing. The six large golf bays are cleaned and sanitized between groups and the bar area, with table seating and large-screen TVs, will offer drinks and snacks once it's safe to do so — all with a friendly family ambiance. "I was very sure that I didn't want it to look like a dark sports bar, per se," Cheryl Harger says. "We're

ABOVE: The Huzhou Hot Spring Golf Course in China is considered an intermediate level course. **TOP RIGHT:** Mini golf is also available. **RIGHT:** The virtual courses have golfers "playing" courses all over the world.



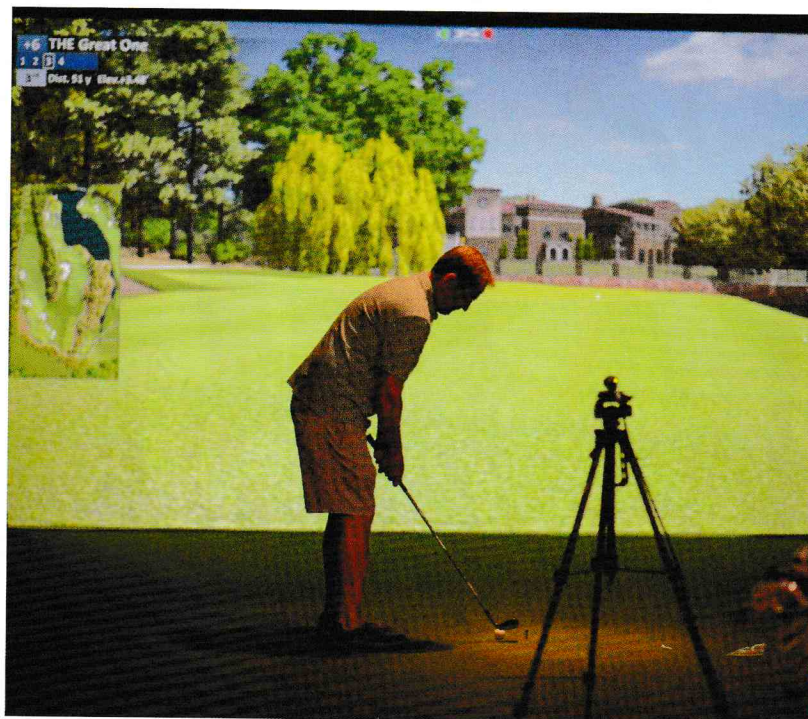
welcoming a lot of families who are coming in here playing mini-golf so it has to have a different vibe than a traditional sports bar.”

The crisp graphics on the simulators include “real” 3-D objects like terrain gradients, trees and foliage, waterfalls and landscaping to give golfers a fairly accurate sense of what it’s like to play some of the world’s most famous courses.

Using multiple cameras to capture the ball’s spin, velocity and angle as it comes off the club allows the machine to effectively pinpoint its path with accuracy — whether it’s soaring at 200 miles an hour off the tee or rolling along the putting green or mini-golf hole, says Scott Harger, who manages the golf side of things at the center.

“Golf is getting bigger and bigger every year,” notes Scott Harger, a golfer since boyhood who recently retired after 20 years with the Connecticut Department of Correction.

“It’s grown even more in the past year since basically golf was the only thing you could do during COVID,”



he says. "A lot more people are playing, and people are trying to figure out how to improve their game during winter or in bad weather."

He'd been selling on eBay after his retirement and storing some of his items in the warehouse when a much larger space opened up, he says.

"I'd been looking for something to do," he recalls. "I'm a golf fanatic and I thought something like this would be a good idea. I had looked into simulators and prices and when we looked at the warehouse space, it was a perfect fit."

It took about nine months to convert the old warehouse facility into a welcoming golfing center. Hardwood floors, bright green turf, expansive ceilings and the detailed virtual landscaping of the finest greens and fairways create an inviting, even somewhat outdoor feel.

"It needed a lot more than we anticipated at first but it turned out really well," Scott Harger says of the space.

The Hargers have since brought staff and golf professionals on board, including Sean Busca, the head golf pro at Clinton Country Club who's been named by Golf Digest as one of the best teachers in Connecticut (2019-2020) in addition to several other PGA distinctions; and Andrew Faria, an assistant golf pro at Fox Hopyard Golf Club, a PGA Apprentice program participant, and golf clinic instructor for Special Olympics athletes.

"The golfing community has been very receptive," Scott Harger says. "The pros do lessons here to help golfers improve their game or teach beginners."


Golf leagues were successful over the winter, with dozens of players enjoying the competition every week. With leagues ending for the season in spring, Scott Harger says, the center is offering summer tournaments with prizes.

"Every week, people can come in and play a certain course and they can win money," he says. "It's like a league but you're not tied in to come every week."

The Hargers are also reaching out to shoreline businesses to set up packages, like they did for Valentine's Day with a local florist, offering flowers and chocolate along with a golf game.

Golfers may book reservations online or by phone and simulator time is available at hourly rates for up to four players simultaneously (\$30-\$35 an hour, May through October). Larger groups, including parties for kids and adults, may reserve two back-to-back bays in a semi-enclosed space.

Playing time depends on the skill level of the players. An experienced golfer, for instance, should complete 18 holes in about an hour (two hours for two golfers, etc.). Reservations may be made online at essexindoorgolf.com or by calling (959) 265-8979.

In addition to simulator play and instruction, the center offers new grips for sale as well as re-gripping services. 

BELOW: A bar area is available to onlookers as well as golfers.

TOP RIGHT: Golf lessons are also available. *Credit*

BOTTOM RIGHT: One of the options to play is the Konopiste d'Este course is located in Central Bohemia, a historic region in present day Czech Republic



