

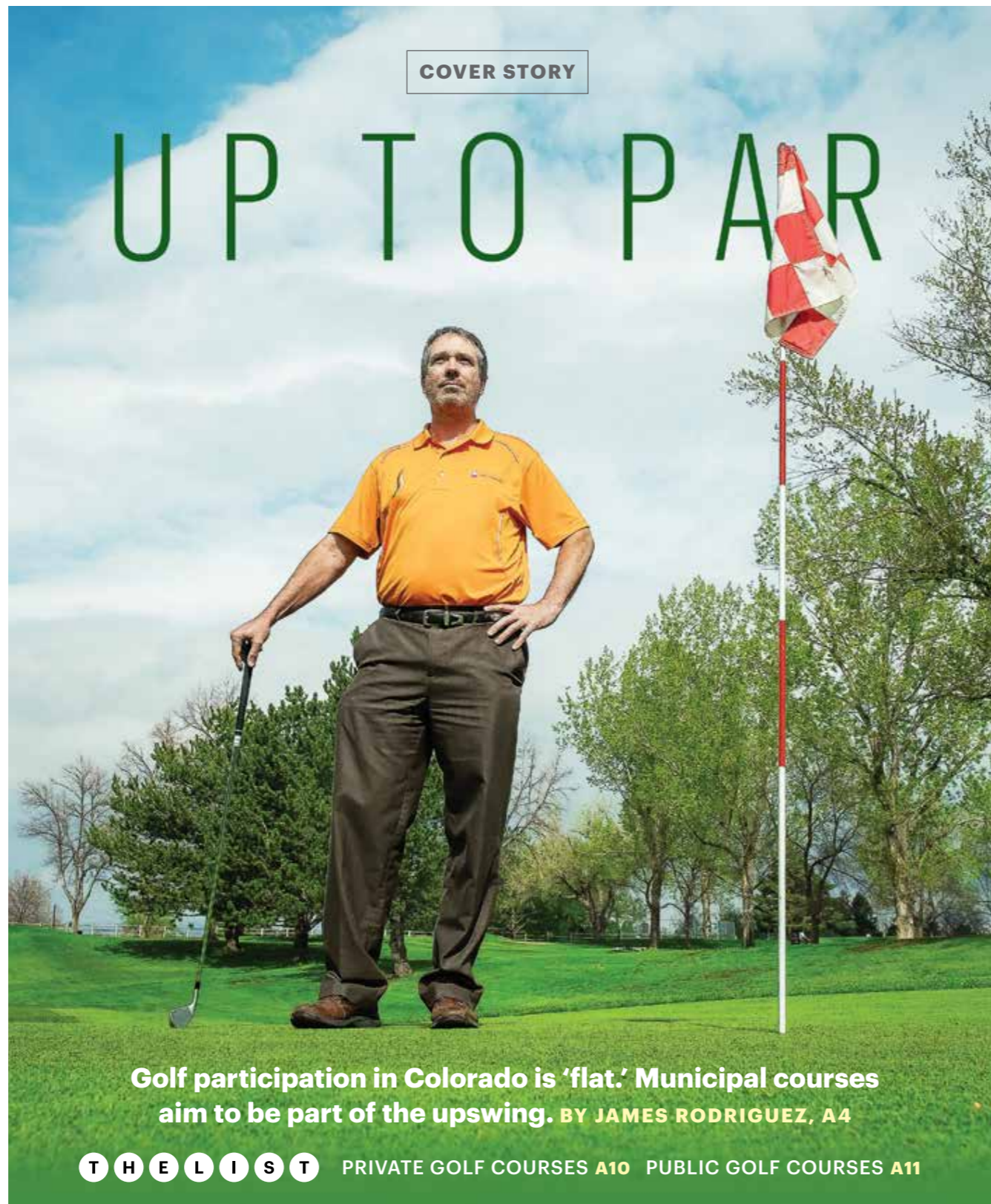
# DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL



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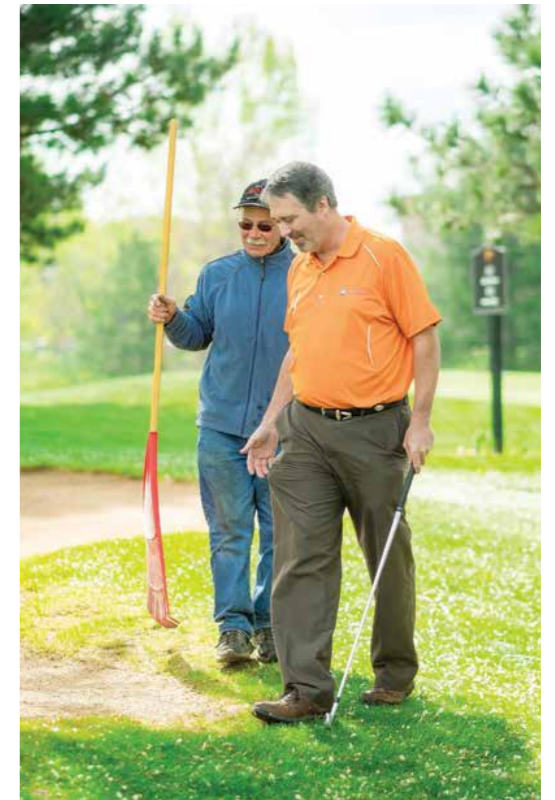
## COVER STORY



## UP TO PAR

Evergreen Golf Course is one of eight courses run by the City of Denver.

PROVIDED BY CITY OF DENVER



Scott Rethlake, director of golf for the City and County of Denver, with Rob Ross, groundskeeper, at Harvard Gulch Golf Course in south Denver.

MARVIN ANANI, SPECIAL TO DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

## GOLF PARTICIPATION IN COLORADO IS 'FLAT.' MUNICIPAL COURSES AIM TO BE PART OF THE UPSWING.

BY JAMES RODRIGUEZ  
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**D**oug McNeil likes to say that he grew up on a municipal golf course.

On summer mornings, his father would drop him off at his local course in the morning and pick him up at dusk. McNeil's first golf job was at a municipal course, the start of a winding career that later took him to resorts in Dallas and Tucson, Arizona, as a golf pro.

He found a home on municipal courses once again in the late '90s, when he took a job with the City of Aurora as a golf business manager for its municipal courses.

"I like the fact that we offer up golf at a reasonable price, and I like to know the game is accessible to as many people as possible," said McNeil, who was named manager of golf in 2011 and has remained with the city for 22 years.

When McNeil arrived in Colora-

Golf gear in the Harvard Gulch Golf Course clubhouse.



MARVIN ANANI, SPECIAL TO DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

do, the state was in the thick of a golf boom, and Aurora was no exception. The city was building two new courses at the time, and real estate developers were fond of pairing new home com-

munities with golf courses in order to raise home values.

The recession in 2008 complicated the picture for golf. Both private and public courses, including Auro-

ra's municipal courses, faced sudden drops in revenue and were forced to cut expenses or even close courses.

"You kept hoping year after year that things would rebound," McNeil said.

Since then, the sport has been dogged by reports of declining participation. Ed Mate, president and CEO of the Colorado Golf Association, pushes back against these claims. He instead asserts that golf participation has remained largely flat since the dip during the recession, based on membership and participation statistics collected annually by the CGA.

Still, Mate recognizes that golf's future depends on replacing aging baby boomers with a younger generation interested in the game. And as the golf industry grapples with how best to grow the sport, municipal courses figure to play a crucial role.

That's especially true in the Denver metro, where a plethora of high-quality public golf courses offer residents a more affordable and accessible alter-

native to country club greens.

"Where the rubber meets the road and where there's the best opportunity to make the game welcoming and inclusive is public golf," Mate said.

Municipal courses fit in the larger category of public courses, which also includes privately owned courses that are open to the public for a daily fee, as well as courses run by recreational districts.

Many of these municipal golf programs, which are owned and operated by cities, are maintained as enterprise

funds, a designation that essentially requires the programs to sustain themselves through revenue from greens fees and other charges. That can prove challenging when market forces lead to a sudden drop-off in the number of rounds played on the courses, as in 2008.

Some municipal golf programs have managed to rebound to pre-2008 levels of rounds played per year, while others say they've had to adjust to golf's new trajectory.

"Over time there's just been a real-

ity that we have not been able to get back to those rounds played," McNeil said. "All of us in the business have had to come to grips with that reality."

Yet McNeil describes Aurora's municipal golf program as "healthy," and Aurora city budget documents support that diagnosis. Revenues from green and cart fees have been steady year over year since 2012. Expenses are down. The golf program appears to be stable.

"Stable" and "healthy" are apt descriptors for the rest of the golf

industry in the Denver metro and in Colorado, according to Mate. But is stable good enough for Colorado golf?

"The answer is no, it's not," Mate said. "Golf is too great a game to try to keep it available only to an exclusive group."

And so municipal courses in the Denver metro are experimenting with ways to make the game – and the land on which it's played – more accessible. They're tinkering with course designs

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### ROUNDS PLAYED Metro Denver total annual rounds of golf played at public courses

