



'THERE HONESTLY ISN'T A SHOT THAT I CAN HIT ON THE COURSE THAT I CANNOT REPLICATE INDOORS ON THE SYSTEM, AND I HAVE SPENT QUITE A WHILE TRYING'

TG INVESTIGATES

GOLF SIMULATORS

A clever gimmick or a brilliant tool for improving your game?

WORDS DAVID CONNOR PICTURES HOWARD BOYLAN

There won't be many golfers that have yet to try a golf simulator in some form. They've been around for about a decade and regularly spring up at events such as The Open Championship, golf shows and other venues where golfers congregate in large numbers. They've also spawned an increasing number of golf bars in cities across the country where you can enjoy a couple of pints and a burger – or even a chicken madras if it takes your fancy – during your 'round'. But just how good are modern simulators and are they a viable alternative to the real thing or just another golfing gimmick?

TG took a closer look at the technology involved as well as paying a visit to uber-cool golf bar Urban Golf in London. But it's worth pointing out that we're not talking about golf games for your home games consoles. These are bona fide golf simulators where a full set of clubs and the hitting of proper golf balls is required – not a Nintendo Wii controller.

One of the most lauded systems on the market is about Golf's brand new 3Trak machine, which is used not only by Urban Golf in their three London venues but by World No.1 Luke Donald in his own home in Chicago. The system uses a series of cameras to track the initial launch of the ball and spin rate and it can also capture relevant clubhead data such as speed, face angle and angle of attack.

The result, according to Urban Golf founder James Day, is a simulator that is

as accurate as the real thing.

"There is no doubt things have moved on dramatically in the years since we opened Urban Golf," says Day.

"Early systems used sensors in the floor to calculate clubhead speed and face angle and then calculate the ball flight from there while other systems had two laser 'walls' the ball had to pass through before hitting the screen in order to predict its flight. "Both worked reasonably well but they weren't perfect and golfers, particularly better players, found they weren't able to shape the ball left and right like they would do on the course. To draw the ball you obviously had to start it right of target but rather than drawing back towards the target the system would predict a ball flight that went straight right or even a fade further to the right.

"The new 3Trak system we have is much more sophisticated because as well as cameras tracking the initial flight of the ball it can also track the clubhead as it moves through the hitting zone for even greater feedback.

"There honestly isn't a shot that I can hit on the course that I cannot replicate indoors on the system, and I have spent quite a while trying."

Another criticism of early simulators was the lack of realism when it came to chipping and putting because the systems couldn't cope with the finesse involved in these shots. Day, a PGA pro and instructor, believes the latest system has taken big strides in resolving these issues, which were the major gripes of many golfers using simulators. >>



Urban Golf's workshop offers a full club-building service.



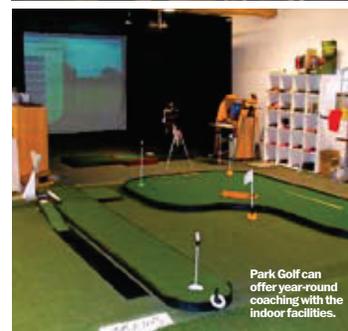
Have clubs built and test them on Urban Golf's simulator.



Park Golf Academy has a fully enclosed practice area.



The Urban Golf club-building 'machine'.



Park Golf can offer year-round coaching with the indoor facilities.

"The good thing about the 3Trak system is that if you hit a two-foot putt on the mat then the putt will only go two feet. You don't have to putt the ball all the way to the screen for it to register as with previous systems and in terms of chipping you can do anything from bump and run to flop shots if you have the skill.

"Most people usually still play gimme putts from about six feet just to speed things up but if you want to hole out every time then you can do so, and that wasn't really an option before.

"We get different types of golfer coming in, from people just looking to have a bit of fun to really serious golfers intent on practising. I really like to take two or three irons and play a course because it means you have to hit lots of different types of shots and it is essentially

'I'M FULLY BOOKED THROUGH THE WINTER THANKS TO THE INDOOR FACILITIES I HAVE'

practice with a real purpose. We also have weekly medals and lots of competitions so it is a real club atmosphere."

But while venues such as Urban Golf are obviously proving popular with consumers, simulators are also striking a chord with teaching pros and changing the service they offer their students.

Indeed Urban Golf has a team of pros working out of the venues giving lessons and doing clubfitting sessions using the simulators as well as having access to other technologies such as balance plates and shaft-loading sensors – all of which help to give more feedback than the naked eye. Other pros are using simulators

to allow them to teach throughout the year no matter the weather. Martin Park set up Park Golf Academy after moving to Denmark from the UK, so knows a thing or two about inclement weather, and he maintains a year-round coaching schedule thanks to his two simulators.

"I'm fully booked throughout the winter thanks to the indoor facilities I have," says Park. "I could have a 10-week course for students completely indoors covering all facets of the game and then when the weather is good they can take what I've been teaching them and transfer that outdoors because the simulators are getting better and better all the time.

"I find using technology helps with coaching because if I have a camera, Trackman or simulator it removes any element of doubt. With that kind of back-up the student learns very quickly because they can see it for themselves and when I then explain what they are doing they understand."

Portable units, such as the new GC2 launch monitor, are also allowing golfers to take the simulator experience onto the range with them. Standing alone the GC2 can give numerical data on where each



"A few shots on the aboutGolf simulator and I was convinced. My game was the same indoors as it is out. Now I can play courses from around the world with closest friends and family. "It is the ultimate indoor environment for golf."

THE TOUR PRO'S VIEW

Even the best players in the world are turning to technology to help them practice. According to Foresight Sports, distributors of the GC2 unit, six of the world's top 10 players regularly practice with a GC2 on the range while Justin Rose and Ian Poulter have a

full simulator installed. And World No.1 Luke Donald has a full aboutGolf 3Trak simulator, the same as at Urban Golf, set up in his home. He said: "The aboutGolf simulator is so realistic it allows me to truly play more of the game I love, not a simulated video game.

CASE STUDY THE GOLF NUT

What do you do if you love golf but the time pressures of work stop you playing the game as often as you like? That's right, install a golf simulator in your office.

That's exactly what Miles Bossom did last year after growing frustrated at his lack of playing and practice time on the golf course. Now the simulator, powered by Foresight Sports' GC2 flight monitor, means a day rarely goes by without him hitting a golf ball.

Bossom, who runs his own publishing company, said: "Obviously last winter was awful in terms of getting out and playing. I think I played one round because of bad weather and I just thought 'I'm going

to put a simulator in'. "I played a few rounds at Urban Golf in town but I couldn't afford the full system they use. The system I have cost £22,000 and it is sturdy, purpose-built with a big 11-foot screen.

'IT MEANS I HIT A BALL EVERY DAY, WHICH WILL MAKE A HUGE DIFFERENCE'

"I'm really hoping this year it will help me take a good few shots off my handicap. If I'm in the office I'll probably hit a ball every day, which is going to make a huge difference. It's a fantastic bit of kit.

"I think it was Laura Davies who said 'I hate

practice, I only do five hours a day' so if that is what it is taking the pros to improve then what chance do we have if we are not hitting balls regularly?

"I've got about 25 courses on the system including Carnoustie, St Andrews, Pebble Beach, The Belfry, Wentworth and Celtic Manor so it's good.

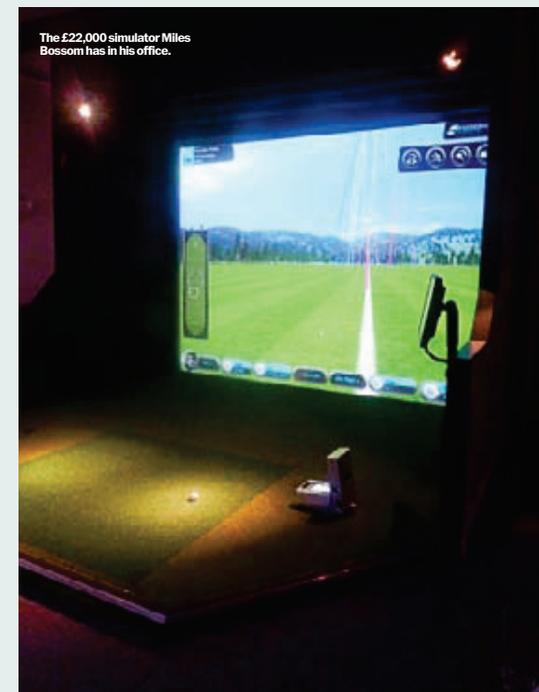
"The greatest thing about this simulator is that I can stand there hitting a 7-iron or a wedge, and I can hit 100 if I like, and it will average out and tell me exactly how far I'm realistically hitting it. You can then take that knowledge onto the course and all of a sudden you are not landing in the bunkers or water."

shot goes but by plugging it into a laptop the unit allows players to virtually play a course from their own range bay.

Luther Blacklock, PGA Master Professional and head pro at Woburn GC, uses the GC2 in many of his lessons and says: "It's truly portable – so tuition is not affected by adverse weather conditions. The practice ground setting is even better than hitting shots on the range in teaching terms, as the vapour trail left on the screen as you practise, is a video of the last shot – which is even more beneficial than a video of the last swing.

"It's made a massive difference to the pupil analysis I can offer as a golf coach."

TG VERDICT: It had been a few years since we'd tried an indoor golf simulator but, at Urban Golf in particular, we were hugely impressed. Like many golfers we had been put off by the shoddy chipping and putting before but, while they are never going to replace getting out onto the course and playing golf, modern simulators offer a viable alternative when that isn't possible and arguably a better practice environment than a range. The difficulty is that although it is every golfer's dream to set up a simulator in their garage or spare room, the sheer cost of the systems is prohibitive with prices ranging from £20,000 upwards. ■



The £22,000 simulator Miles Bossom has in his office.