

The Indoor Golf Startup Playbook

How to choose the right model, space, bay count, software, and launch plan before you sign a lease.



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A PRACTICAL PLAYBOOK
FOR BUILDING A PROFITABLE
INDOOR GOLF BUSINESS.



CHOOSE THE
RIGHT MODEL



SIZE YOUR SPACE
WITH CONFIDENCE



PICK SOFTWARE
THAT SCALES



LAUNCH SMART.
GROW FASTER.

Foreword: don't start with the simulator

Most people who want to open an indoor golf facility begin with the same question:

What launch monitor should I buy?

It is an understandable question. The simulator is the visible object. It is the thing customers talk about. It is the thing vendors sell. It is the thing that makes the business feel real.

But it is not the first decision.

The first decision is what kind of business you are building.

Are you building a small members-only practice club? A hybrid facility with members and public drop-ins? A bar-forward entertainment venue? A coaching studio? A league-driven winter business? A mostly automated 24/7 facility? A staffed hospitality business? Each of those can use a golf simulator, but they are not the same business.

That distinction matters because almost every expensive decision depends on it:

- how many bays you need
- how much space you can afford
- whether you need staff
- whether food and beverage helps or distracts
- how much automation you need
- what insurance will cost
- what your booking software has to enforce
- whether members, leagues, lessons, public play, events, or food will carry the economics

The most useful warning from the operator corpus is blunt:

Greg S., former indoor golf center owner: *"You need to understand your market, understand proper lease costs for your business model and have a solid plan. Many ways to go about it but slapping 2-5 simulators in a room isn't going to get it done."*

That is the spirit of this guide.

This is not a hype piece about the indoor golf boom. It is a practical startup playbook for deciding whether the business works before you sign a lease, order equipment, or start posting renderings of a club that has not been pressure-tested yet.

How to use this playbook

Use this guide before you lock in:

- a lease
- a bay count
- a launch monitor vendor
- a food and beverage plan
- an access-control system
- a membership model
- a staffing model
- your opening offer

The goal is not to produce a perfect business plan. The goal is to stop expensive mistakes early.

Read it in order if you are still pre-lease. If you already have a site, jump to the sections on lease/buildout, bay count, access, and opening demand. If you already own a facility and are pivoting, focus on the chapters about model fit, pricing, software, and slow-season retention.

Executive summary: the seven decisions that matter most

The indoor golf startup decision tree has seven gates.

1. Choose the operating model before the technology

The major models are:

- **Members-only / private access:** recurring revenue, controlled usage, often 24/7 or semi-automated.
- **Hybrid:** members plus public drop-ins, more revenue surfaces, more operational complexity.
- **Public-first / entertainment:** hourly play, parties, events, food or bar, higher staffing and hospitality load.
- **Instruction-first:** lessons, coaching, fittings, clinics, and bay rental as a secondary revenue layer.

Your model determines your space, staff, software, insurance, and marketing.

2. Prove demand before opening

"Build it and they will come" is not a plan. The operators with the strongest pre-launch posture are usually building founding-member demand, local partnerships, leagues, and a very specific audience before opening.

Tyler A., indoor golf operator: *"I'll be opening up here probably within four months. Going to be pushing hard on the founding members. My plan of attack is lots of boots on the ground marketing."*

That quote is useful as a planning posture, not proof of outcome. The underlying point is that demand work should start before the doors open, and it should be measured with real buyer signals instead of excitement alone.

3. Lease and buildout can kill the business before customers ever see it

The corpus contains repeated warnings about rent burn, contractor delays, HVAC, bathrooms, ceiling work, electrical, and hidden buildout costs. Public startup-cost guides commonly show small studio ranges from roughly \$50,000 to \$250,000 and larger/more polished facilities climbing into the mid-six figures or higher. Operator examples in the corpus range from lean DIY builds to hundreds of thousands in buildout plus rent before opening.

4. Bay count is a business-model decision

One bay can work if overhead is low and access is automated. Two or three bays can work in a small market, but capacity is tight and events are limited. Four to six bays is often the first real "facility" size. Eight-plus bays usually implies a more public, event, bar, or staffed operating model.

5. 24/7 is not "unstaffed"; it is a different operating system

Unmanned facilities can work, but they require access control, waiver flow, cameras, cleaning discipline, remote reset capability, booking rules, and insurance alignment.

William D., risk-management operator: *"Do not do a lockbox or a keypad. 24/7 operations alone slice the number of willing insurers by 75%. You'll need to be able to track entry."*

Treat the 75% figure as one operator's anecdotal market experience, not a published industry statistic. The actionable point is broader: 24/7 access narrows underwriting options, and traceable entry matters.

6. Food and beverage is not automatically margin

Food can increase dwell time, support parties, and make the venue feel social. It can also add staff, licenses, waste, operational drag, and tenant-improvement costs. For many lean facilities, partnership beats kitchen.

7. Opening is not the finish line

The first winter may feel like product-market fit. The first summer tests whether the business model is durable. Your real plan needs to include slow-season retention, leagues, memberships, events, instruction, corporate outings, or other demand channels that keep the facility from becoming a cold-weather-only novelty.

Research base

This guide draws from three layers:

- 1 **SnagATime directory research:** thousands of indoor golf facilities and membership/pricing surfaces collected for the first benchmark eBook.
- 2 **Operator corpus:** 20,537 flattened Facebook comments and 2,737 posts from a public indoor-golf operator group, with extracted themes, price mentions, vendor mentions, and quote banks.
- 3 **Current public references:** vendor/spec pages and commercial startup-cost guides used only as directional triangulation.

The Facebook corpus is not a statistically representative survey. It is operator conversation data, and it has survivorship bias: operators who closed, never opened, or stopped participating are less visible. Treat it as signal about what operators repeatedly worry about, not as a clean census.

The theme counts below come from analyzer-generated tags stored on each flattened comment in the export, with editorial review for startup relevance. A single comment can carry multiple themes, so raw mentions should not be read as unique-comment counts.

Corpus quotes span multiple years. Treat specific dollar figures as directional operator examples, not inflation-adjusted 2026 benchmarks.

The most common startup-relevant themes in the corpus were:

Theme	Raw mentions	Why it matters
24/7 / unstaffed operations	960	Access, automation, cameras, insurance, customer behavior
Lease / buildout	536	Rent, HVAC, contractors, dimensions, electrical, hidden cost
Membership pricing	535	Recurring revenue, access rules, capacity tradeoffs
League play	339	Demand generation and retention
Marketing	297	Opening demand and positioning
Insurance	270	24/7, liability, alcohol, waivers, property coverage
Food service	176	Revenue upside vs operational complexity

The lesson is clear: operators talk less about "which simulator is coolest" than pre-launch buyers expect. They talk about whether the whole system works.

Chapter 1: Pick the operating model first

An indoor golf facility is not one business. It is a category that contains several different businesses.

Members-only / private access

This model sells controlled access. It usually works best when:

- the facility is small
- overhead is low
- the owner does not want full-time staff
- the local golfer base values practice and convenience
- the booking rules can protect capacity
- members understand the facility is a club, not a public entertainment venue

Members-only facilities often pair well with 24/7 or extended access. The economic goal is not to maximize one-off hourly bookings; it is to create enough recurring revenue to cover fixed costs and produce predictable cash flow.

The risk is overuse. If "unlimited" members can consume peak hours freely, your best customers can become your biggest capacity problem. Members-only models need clear rules:

- booking window
- daily or weekly caps
- guest policy
- cancellation rules
- peak/off-peak access
- no-show consequences
- whether members can use multiple bays at once

Hybrid

Hybrid facilities sell both recurring access and public play. This is often the most flexible model, but also the easiest to make messy.

Hybrid can work well when:

- the facility has enough bays to support both segments
- members understand what they get
- public rates are high enough to protect peak inventory
- members do not feel squeezed out by drop-ins
- drop-ins can become members
- booking software can enforce different rules cleanly

Hybrid is usually more complex than members-only because it has to answer two questions at once:

- How do we protect the member experience?
- How do we keep public revenue flowing?

Public-first / entertainment

Public-first facilities are built around hourly play, parties, corporate events, food and beverage, social groups, and high-visibility demand. They can produce more revenue per customer visit, but they also carry more moving parts:

- more staff
- more cleanup
- more customer-service load
- more food/bar complexity
- more event coordination
- more buildout polish
- more insurance complexity

This is not wrong. It is just a different business.

The biggest mistake is accidentally building an entertainment venue while modeling the business like a low-overhead golf club.

Instruction-first

Instruction-first facilities make lessons, coaching, fittings, or junior development the anchor. Bay rental becomes one revenue stream, not the entire model.

This model can work especially well when:

- the owner is a coach

- there is a strong local lesson market
- the facility can charge a premium for instruction
- technology is chosen for practice and data, not just simulator play
- bay time can be monetized through pros or partnerships

Instruction-first economics are different because a bay used for a lesson may generate much more than the same bay rented for public play.

The decision

Before buying equipment, write one sentence:

We are opening a [model] facility for [specific customer] who wants [specific job-to-be-done], and we will make money primarily through [primary revenue stream].

Examples:

- We are opening a two-bay, 24/7 members-only club for serious local golfers who want convenient practice access, and we will make money primarily through recurring memberships.
- We are opening a four-bay hybrid facility for golfers and small groups who want premium simulator play, and we will make money primarily through memberships, public hourly play, and leagues.
- We are opening an eight-bay bar-forward venue for social groups and corporate events, and we will make money primarily through hourly play, food and beverage, and events.

If the sentence is fuzzy, the rest of the plan will be fuzzy.

Chapter 2: Prove demand before the lease

The most dangerous version of this business is a beautiful facility with no specific audience.

Technology alone is not a hook anymore. Many customers now know what a simulator is. Many golfers have used one. Some have access to a home setup. Some belong to a club with indoor bays. Some have a Topgolf nearby. That does not mean indoor golf is saturated everywhere, but it does mean "we have TrackMan" is not enough of a positioning statement by itself.

Kyle Morris, Consultant to Indoor Golf Facilities: *"Technology is table stakes now. What actually drives traffic is clarity: Who is this specifically for? What problem does it solve better than anything else nearby?"*

Pick the first customer

Do not define your market as "golfers." That is too broad.

Pick a first customer segment:

- low-handicap golfers who want serious practice
- beginners who are intimidated by outdoor golf
- leagues and winter groups
- small-market golfers with no local indoor option
- corporate teams and client entertainment
- juniors and families
- women golfers
- retirees with daytime flexibility
- instructors and coaches
- members of nearby outdoor clubs

Then ask:

- Where do they already spend money?
- What do they currently do when weather is bad?
- What frustrates them about existing options?
- How often would they realistically use the facility?
- Are they likely to buy a membership, public booking, lesson, league, or event?

Validate before signing

Pre-launch validation does not need to be fancy. It needs to be real.

Useful validation signals:

- founding-member deposits
- league waitlist
- signed instructor partnerships
- corporate/event inquiries
- local golf-club partnership conversations
- email list with local golfers, not generic followers

- paid pre-opening packages
- warm introductions from local pros
- local business partnerships

Weak validation signals:

- friends saying "cool idea"
- social likes from non-local golfers
- vendor-provided ROI projections that have not been localized to your rent, seasonality, and customer-acquisition plan
- a beautiful rendering
- a competitor being busy in January
- a spreadsheet with optimistic utilization

The strongest pre-opening operators in the corpus talk about boots-on-the-ground work, founding members, and a specific aesthetic or audience. They are not just "announcing" a facility. They are building the first customer base before the doors open.

Build the opening offer

Your opening offer should do three jobs:

- 1 Create urgency before launch.
- 2 Teach customers how to use the facility.
- 3 Give you predictable early revenue.

Good opening offers are specific:

- 50 founding memberships at a locked first-year rate
- first winter league with limited team slots
- pre-sold corporate event packages
- junior winter training block
- instructor founding partner package
- off-peak daytime membership for retirees
- practice club for serious golfers with launch-data sessions

Avoid making the opening offer only a discount. Discounting can fill the calendar while training the wrong customers to expect cheap golf.

Chapter 3: The lease is the business model in disguise

Most indoor golf operators obsess over simulator cost. But lease and buildout are often more dangerous because they are harder to unwind.

A launch monitor can be resold. A bad lease can bleed you every month.

The four lease questions

Before signing, answer:

- 1 **Does the rent fit the expected slow-season revenue?**
- 2 **Does the space physically support safe, comfortable bays?**
- 3 **Does the landlord/building allow the required buildout?**
- 4 **Can you afford rent during buildout delays?**

The operator corpus is full of examples where buildout complexity created real pain.

Phillip W., indoor golf operator: "400K for sims and build outs. 100K in building out the rest of the store... And 100K in rent before I opened because [we] paid rent for almost 14 months before I opened the doors."

That is the nightmare version: the facility is not open, revenue is zero, and rent is already compounding.

Space requirements

Commercial simulator bay dimensions vary by technology and design, but the planning reality is simple: tight bays feel cheap and unsafe.

TrackMan's public simulator specs currently list recommended room dimensions of 15+ feet wide, 10+ feet high, and 18+ feet deep. Treat that 10-foot height as a vendor floor, not a comfort target for every golfer; faster or taller swings may need more ceiling clearance. For minimum single-dexterity, off-center setups, meaning a bay configured for either right- or left-handed players rather than both, TrackMan notes that minimum width and height should be sized for swing clearance and lists screen-to-ball distance separately. Design2Golf's PGA-kit planning material cites Proponent Group, a cooperative of PGA professionals, with survey averages of roughly 17 feet wide, 22.75 feet deep, and 15 feet high for indoor-golf bays. TrackMan's recommended depth is shallower than the surveyed average, so use the larger figure when space allows. These are not absolute requirements for every facility, but they are useful reminders: commercial comfort takes more space than a garage simulator.

When evaluating a space, check:

- ceiling height after flooring and turf
- beam, duct, sprinkler, and light placement
- bay width for right- and left-handed players
- safe backswing clearance
- impact-screen depth and maintenance access
- projector throw
- seating depth behind hitting area
- ADA pathing and bathroom requirements
- electrical and networking runs
- HVAC load
- sound transfer to neighboring tenants
- exterior signage and visibility
- parking

HVAC, bathrooms, electrical, ceilings

The expensive parts are often not the golf parts.

James H., indoor golf operator: "HVAC is expensive and sometimes you need to get a mechanical engineer involved, get quotes and check with your municipality's building inspector."

Do not treat "empty shell" as a blank canvas. Treat it as a risk register.

Ask the landlord and contractors:

- Who pays for HVAC changes?
- Are bathrooms already code-compliant?
- Can ceilings be raised?
- Are sprinklers affected?
- What is the electrical capacity?
- Are there restrictions on golf balls, impact noise, or alcohol?
- Can you install door access?

- Is signage included?
- Is there a tenant-improvement allowance?
- When does rent start?
- Is there rent abatement during buildout?
- What happens if permits delay opening?

Rent should be modeled against bad months

Do not model rent only against peak winter demand.

Model:

- winter peak month
- shoulder month
- slow summer month
- first six months after opening
- first year after the novelty wears off

If you need heroic utilization to cover rent in a slow month, the lease is probably too heavy.

Chapter 4: Bay count and layout

Bay count is not just capacity. It is the operating model.

One bay

One bay can work when:

- rent is very low
- access is automated
- the facility is membership-based or niche
- owner time is limited
- the goal is side income or a small local club

One bay is fragile for events and public demand. A single equipment issue can take the whole business offline.

Two to three bays

Two to three bays can work for:

- small markets
- members-only clubs
- instruction studios
- lean hybrid facilities
- owner-operated businesses

The challenge is peak-time scarcity. If every good customer wants the same after-work windows, membership rules have to be disciplined.

Four to six bays

Four to six bays is often the first size where the facility can support:

- leagues
- simultaneous public and member use
- small events
- meaningful booking variety
- multiple customer segments

It also raises buildout, cleaning, support, and operating complexity.

Eight-plus bays

Eight-plus bays usually means you are building a venue, not just a club. The opportunity is larger events, more public traffic, and a stronger hospitality experience. The risk is fixed cost, staff, and demand generation.

Layout rules

Good layout should feel obvious to a customer:

- where to check in
- where to put clubs
- where to sit
- where not to stand
- where the screen begins and danger zone ends
- how to use the equipment

- how to get help

Design for:

- left- and right-handed players
- groups of four
- bag storage
- drink/food surface
- coats and shoes
- camera visibility
- emergency exit paths
- cleaning access
- screen replacement
- projector maintenance
- future equipment replacement

The best bay is not the most elaborate bay. It is the bay that customers can use safely, comfortably, repeatedly, and without staff having to explain everything every time.

Chapter 5: Startup cost ranges

There is no universal indoor golf startup cost. The range is too wide because the business models are too different.

A lean one- or two-bay club in an inexpensive space is not the same project as an eight-bay bar-forward venue with a kitchen, liquor license, staff, premium finishes, and top-tier simulator systems.

Directional ranges

Public 2026 cost guides commonly frame total startup investment roughly like this:

Facility type	Directional startup range	What changes the number
Lean studio / small club	\$50,000-\$250,000	DIY buildout, low rent, lean scope, minimal staff
Mid-size indoor golf center	\$350,000-\$650,000	3-6 bays, commercial systems, meaningful buildout
Large / hospitality-heavy venue	\$750,000-\$900,000+	more bays, food/bar, premium finishes, staff, working capital

Those public ranges should be treated as planning anchors, not guarantees. The gaps between bands are intentional buffer zones: a \$300,000 project may be either an expensive lean club or a disciplined mid-size build, and a \$700,000 project may be either a polished mid-size center or a restrained hospitality venue. The operating model, lease, buildout scope, and staffing plan matter more than the label.

Michael B., five-bay facility operator: "I was able to build out 5 bays DIY with all equipment... for around 200k. But I did the work..."

Phillip W., indoor golf operator: "400K for sims and build outs. 100K in building out the rest of the store... And 100K in rent before I opened..."

The DIY buildout example is the unusual case that proves why the table should not be read as bay-count destiny. A skilled DIY operator can sometimes stretch a lean budget across more bays, while contractor-heavy work can push a project into a higher cost band. The rent-burn example does not include bay count, so use it as a lease and buildout warning rather than a per-bay benchmark.

The difference is not just "expensive vendor vs cheap vendor." It is:

- condition of the space
- contractor dependence
- rent timing
- number of bays
- technology tier
- whether the owner self-performs work
- whether food/bar is included
- level of finish
- permits and inspections
- contingency

Per-bay planning buckets

For each bay, budget for:

- launch monitor
- enclosure/screen/netting
- projector or display

- computer
- hitting mat/strip
- flooring/turf
- seating and table surfaces
- lighting
- cabling/network
- installation
- software/license
- replacement reserve

Public commercial cost guides often put commercial simulator systems in broad ranges from low-five-figure budget bays to much higher premium commercial bays. The useful planning move is to separate **golf equipment cost** from **facility cost**.

Many operators underestimate facility cost because they price the simulator package and forget:

- HVAC
- bathrooms
- electrical
- walls
- ceiling paint
- permits
- architect/engineer
- signage
- cameras
- door access
- furniture
- sound management
- working capital
- insurance deposits
- marketing before opening

Build a minimum viable facility budget

Use three budgets:

- 1 Bare minimum to open safely.**
- 2 Target experience.**
- 3 Premium version you should probably not build yet.**

Then pressure-test each one against:

- slow-season revenue
- rent before opening
- debt service
- owner salary expectations
- maintenance reserve
- replacement reserve
- marketing spend
- sales tax and payroll tax

The goal is not to make the spreadsheet impressive. The goal is to make it hard to fool yourself.

Chapter 6: Food, beverage, and the hospitality trap

Food and beverage can be powerful, but it changes the business.

The key distinction is whether F&B is part of the operating model or an add-on bolted onto a club model. A bar-forward entertainment venue can absolutely make food and beverage part of the reason customers visit. The trap is importing restaurant complexity into a lean golf facility without the staffing, licensing, throughput discipline, and management model to support it.

It can help with:

- parties
- corporate events
- dwell time
- social leagues
- non-golfer companions

- premium feel
- revenue per visit

It can also add:

- staff
- health-code requirements
- liquor-license complexity
- waste
- inventory
- cleaning
- insurance
- buildout
- customer-service burden
- management distraction

One operator put the F&B concern bluntly:

Sam M., indoor golf club owner: *"Food businesses make money by turning over meals every 10 mins, not every hour."*

Do not read "10 mins" as a literal benchmark for sit-down restaurants. Read it as a blunt warning about throughput. Golf simulator customers often occupy space for one to three hours; meanwhile, food, drinks, and snacks may cycle on a different rhythm. That can work in a bar-forward model, but the economics have to be modeled intentionally instead of assumed.

Four F&B paths

1. No food, no alcohol

Best for:

- lean members-only facilities
- instruction-first spaces
- unmanned operations
- operators avoiding licensing/staff complexity

Risk:

- less event appeal
- fewer social occasions
- lower per-visit spend

2. Light beverage/snack

Best for:

- hybrid clubs
- small social venues
- facilities with limited staff

Risk:

- still adds inventory, compliance, and cleanup

3. Partnered food

Best for:

- facilities near restaurants
- venues that want convenience without a kitchen
- operators who want food as amenity, not core business

Phillip W., indoor golf operator: "We partnered up with a pizzeria in the same shopping plaza... I get 20% revenue... It streamlines the process, allows people to stay longer... and I still make some money."

4. Full kitchen / bar

Best for:

- event-heavy venues
- larger public-first facilities
- operators with hospitality experience
- markets where food/bar is core to the customer job

Risk:

- this is now also a restaurant/bar business

The decision

Ask:

- Is food a profit center or an amenity?
- Does it support the primary customer?
- Does the lease/buildout cost make sense?
- Will alcohol change insurance and staffing?
- Can a local restaurant partnership solve 80% of the need?
- Are we building a golf club or a hospitality venue?

Chapter 7: 24/7 access and automation

24/7 sounds simple: customers book, receive access, and play.

In practice, 24/7 is a full operating model.

What 24/7 requires

At minimum:

- online booking
- payment before access
- digital waiver
- door-access system
- cameras
- clear house rules
- cleaning process
- incident process
- remote support
- equipment reset plan
- no-show/cancellation rules
- insurance approval

The corpus strongly suggests that "unstaffed" is not the same as "hands off." The facility still needs systems. They just replace staff with rules, automation, monitoring, and follow-up.

Access-control mistakes

The riskiest version is a shared code, lockbox, or keypad that cannot reliably prove who entered.

William D., risk-management operator: "Do not do a lockbox or a keypad... You'll need to be able to track entry."

If you are planning 24/7, ask your insurer directly:

- Is unmanned operation covered?
- Are shared codes allowed?
- Do we need named-user access logs?
- Are cameras required?
- Are waivers required?
- Is alcohol compatible with unmanned hours?
- Are there equipment-theft exclusions?
- What liability limits are required by the lease?

Automation realities

Booking, door access, simulator startup, shutdown, lights, projectors, PCs, and software reset are usually not one clean system. Operators often stitch together:

- booking software
- payment processor
- door access
- cameras
- smart outlets
- simulator software
- launch-monitor software
- remote desktop
- scripts/macros

Matt O., unmanned-facility operator: *"The software suppliers don't cater for unmanned whatsoever."*

That does not mean unmanned cannot work, and the software landscape is improving as more operators move toward automated access. It does mean you should verify the full workflow instead of assuming one vendor covers booking, access, simulator control, waivers, and resets out of the box. You should also confirm the vendor provides the support you need.

Build the failure checklist

Before launch, write the answer for:

- What happens if the PC freezes?
- What happens if the launch monitor disconnects?
- What happens if the door does not unlock?
- What happens if the customer arrives early?
- What happens if the previous group does not leave?
- What happens if a customer leaves a mess?
- What happens if a customer brings unauthorized guests?
- What happens if power goes out?
- What happens if a ball damages equipment?
- What happens if the customer cannot start the round?

If every answer is "they call me," you are the automation.

Chapter 8: Software stack

The software stack is not just a booking calendar. For an indoor golf facility, it often needs to support:

- online reservations
- memberships
- member vs public pricing
- peak/off-peak pricing
- no-show rules
- cancellation windows

- waivers
- door access
- gift cards/packages
- leagues
- events
- reporting
- payments
- staff/admin workflow
- customer support

The stack should match the model.

Members-only stack

Needs:

- recurring billing
- member eligibility
- booking limits
- guest fees
- door access
- waiver on file
- cancellation enforcement

Hybrid stack

Needs:

- member and public pricing
- rate cards by time
- booking windows by customer type
- packages
- drop-in checkout
- upgrade path from public to member

Public-first stack

Needs:

- strong public booking
- events
- groups
- deposits
- refunds
- staff calendar
- POS or payment integration
- marketing attribution

24/7 stack

Needs:

- access control
- automated reminders
- remote unlock fallback
- no-show/cancellation enforcement
- incident audit trail
- cameras and customer identity

Vendor choice: simulator first, then software

Operator comments are full of vendor opinions, especially around launch monitors and simulator systems. The useful lesson is not that one vendor is always right. It is that every vendor choice has tradeoffs.

Greg S., former indoor golf center owner: *"Everyone has an angle... The end goal is to find the best simulator fit for your specific business model."*

The same discipline applies to booking software, access control, payment processing, and league tools.

Watch for:

- per-reservation fees

- limits around memberships
- lack of door-access integration
- weak cancellation/no-show handling
- poor league support
- hard-to-export data
- manual workarounds
- unclear payment reconciliation

Per-reservation pricing can look inexpensive at low volume and become painful as usage grows. If your model depends on many recurring members booking frequently, calculate the at-scale fee before committing.

Chapter 9: Insurance, waivers, and risk

Insurance is not a checkbox. It is part of the operating model.

The corpus shows operators comparing liability limits, property coverage, equipment coverage, liquor liability, workers' compensation, and unmanned-operation constraints.

One useful example, with an important caveat:

Clayton D., one-bay unmanned facility owner in Iowa: *"I'm unmanned in Iowa. One bay, \$30k equipment (\$500 deductible), \$50k breakdown/lost revenue, liability at \$1M/\$2M. No alcohol or food sales. Leased property. Premium is \$820/year... Requires a waiver for each reservation."*

That number is not a universal quote, and the excerpt appears to include a limited breakdown/lost-revenue amount rather than a full business-interruption benchmark. It also does not cover every policy a different facility may need, including liquor liability, workers' compensation, or larger property limits. It is a reminder that insurance depends heavily on:

- state
- facility model
- unmanned vs staffed
- alcohol
- food
- property value

- equipment value
- liability limits
- lease requirements
- waiver process
- access-control method
- claims history

Ask before you sign

Ask insurance brokers:

- Do you cover unmanned indoor golf facilities?
- Do you cover 24/7 access?
- What access-control logs do you require?
- What waiver process do you require?
- What happens if a customer shares access?
- Is liquor allowed?
- Is BYOB allowed?
- Is food allowed?
- Are leagues/events treated differently?
- Is equipment theft covered?
- Is business interruption covered?
- What liability limits does the landlord require?

Ask the landlord:

- What coverage limits are required?
- Are additional insured endorsements required?
- Is alcohol allowed?
- Are after-hours operations allowed?
- Is customer access without staff allowed?
- Are cameras required?

Do not assume the answer. Get it in writing.

Chapter 10: Pricing and membership basics

Pricing has to reflect both customer value and capacity math.

The first benchmark eBook covers membership pricing in depth. This startup guide focuses on the pre-opening decisions that shape pricing:

- model
- bay count
- market density
- staffing
- access rules
- peak demand
- seasonality
- member/public mix

Hourly pricing

Hourly pricing should consider:

- local alternatives
- outdoor golf cost
- competitor simulator rates
- number of people included
- peak vs off-peak
- technology tier
- privacy/premium feel
- food/bar/event positioning

The corpus price mentions show hourly rates across a wide range, with many examples around \$30-\$60/hour and some premium/event contexts higher.

Membership pricing

Memberships should answer:

- How many hours are included?
- Are hours peak or off-peak?
- How far ahead can members book?
- Can members bring guests?
- Is there a guest fee?
- Are unused hours banked?
- Is unlimited actually unlimited?
- Can one member monopolize peak capacity?
- Is there a contract term?
- Can members book multiple bays?

The more flexible the membership, the more expensive it should be.

Founding memberships

Founding memberships can create early cash and social proof, but they should not trap the business in a bad long-term price.

Good founding offers:

- limited number
- clear expiration
- clear booking rules
- clear renewal price
- no vague "lifetime" promises
- enough urgency to move pre-launch buyers

Avoid selling unlimited access too cheaply just because you need early revenue.

Chapter 11: Marketing, leagues, and retention

Opening buzz is not the same as durable demand.

Indoor golf facilities often get attention when they open. The harder question is what happens after the novelty fades and weather improves.

The corpus repeatedly points to three durable demand tools:

- memberships
- leagues/tournaments
- community/atmosphere

Bruce G., indoor golf operator: *"I know people with simulators that still pay to do a winter league for the same reason beer costs 75 cents at home and \$5 at a bar. Atmosphere."*

Your first 100 customers

Before launch, build a list of:

- local golfers
- golf leagues
- course members
- instructors
- junior golf families
- corporate event buyers
- charity tournament organizers
- local business owners
- bachelor/party planners
- winter practice groups

Then create specific offers:

- founding member night
- free preview for local pros
- first league signup
- corporate preview block
- junior winter clinic
- local-business networking event
- couples/social scramble night

Leagues

Leagues work because they create recurring reasons to return. They also solve the "home simulator" objection. A customer may have a simulator at home, but they do not have:

- a league table
- prizes
- friends
- social pressure
- structured competition
- a venue atmosphere

Leagues are not just revenue. They are retention.

Slow season

If your facility is in a seasonal golf market, plan slow-season retention before opening.

Options:

- summer membership
- practice packages
- instructor partnerships
- junior camps
- corporate events
- club fitting
- off-peak specials
- tournaments
- social nights
- outdoor-course partnerships

Do not wait until May to discover that winter demand was not the same as year-round demand.

Chapter 12: The pre-lease checklist

Do not sign until you can answer these.

Model

- What is the primary operating model?
- What is the primary customer segment?
- What is the primary revenue stream?
- What is the backup revenue stream?
- What does the facility not do?

Market

- How many local golfers are within 15-20 minutes?
- What are the competing simulator options?
- What are outdoor-season alternatives?
- Who will buy before opening?
- What local partnerships exist?

Space

- Ceiling height?
- Bay depth?
- Bay width?
- Electrical capacity?
- HVAC status?
- Bathrooms?
- ADA pathing?
- Parking?
- Signage?
- Neighboring tenants?
- Sound transfer?

Lease

- Rent start date?
- Rent abatement?

- Tenant-improvement allowance?
- Permitted use?
- Alcohol allowed?
- Unstaffed access allowed?
- Assignment/sublease terms?
- Renewal options?
- Personal guarantee?
- Required insurance limits?

Buildout

- Contractor quotes?
- Permit timeline?
- HVAC quote?
- Electrical quote?
- Network/camera plan?
- Door-access install?
- Screen replacement access?
- Contingency?

Software and access

- Booking system?
- Payment processor?
- Membership enforcement?
- Door access?
- Waiver flow?
- Customer identity?
- Remote support?
- Refund/cancellation rules?

Insurance

- Broker reviewed model?
- 24/7 approved if relevant?
- Alcohol approved if relevant?
- Waiver requirements known?
- Property/equipment coverage?
- Business interruption?
- Lease limits met?

Opening demand

- Founding offer?
- First 50 members?
- First league?
- First corporate/event buyers?
- Local pro/instructor relationships?
- Email list?
- Pre-opening content?
- Referral plan?

Chapter 13: The startup scorecard

Score each category from 1 to 5.

Use 2 and 4 as between-rung scores when reality sits between the visible anchors.

Category	1	3	5
Model clarity	"Indoor golf business"	mostly clear	specific customer + model + revenue stream
Demand proof	friends like it	email/social interest	deposits, founding members, league signups
Lease risk	rent starts immediately, heavy buildout	some abatement	rent + buildout align with slow-season math
Bay layout	tight/uncertain	workable	safe, comfortable, maintainable
Buildout certainty	rough guesses	contractor walk-throughs	written quotes + contingency

Category	1	3	5
Insurance	not started	preliminary broker call	model reviewed and quoted
Software/access	generic booking	partial fit	model-specific workflow mapped
Opening offer	discount	general presale	specific founding offer with rules
Slow-season plan	none	vague	leagues/memberships/events/instruction plan

If any category is a 1, pause.

If lease risk, insurance, or model clarity is below 3, do not sign yet.

Closing: build the smallest version of the right business

The best startup advice in the corpus is simple:

Derek C., club owner: "Don't go too big. Run mean and lean as you start out and invest in incredible tech and experience for members."

That does not mean cheap.

It means focused.

Focused on the right customer. Focused on the right model. Focused on a lease that does not crush the business. Focused on bays that feel safe and premium. Focused on software that supports how you actually operate. Focused on opening demand before opening day.

Indoor golf can be a real business. But it is not real because there are simulators in the room.

It becomes real when the model, market, space, software, pricing, and customer experience all point in the same direction.

Start there.

Source notes

Public references consulted for directional cost and planning context:

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- fb_full_export/posts_normalized.json - 2,737 posts
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