

# Golf Car Vandalism:



## No Joyride

*Vandalism has become a common occurrence at many golf courses across the nation. While vandals have been known to target all areas of a course and its operation, their most damaging acts are done to golf cars and to the course while joyriding in golf cars. One estimate places the annual damage at \$8 million to \$10 million per year. What can be done to stop these random acts of vandalism? This whitepaper provides some answers.*



Prepared by Club Car, Inc.

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## Executive Summary

Nearly every golf facility encounters some form of vandalism at one time or another. Pro shops are broken into, on-course restrooms are trashed and neighborhood kids steal pins and tee markers. But it is vandalism involving golf cars that causes the most serious and costly damage at a golf course. The growing number of incidents, the cost of repairing damage done to their course and golf car fleet, not to mention the impact it can have on the daily operations of a golf facility, make golf car vandalism one of the biggest concerns for many course owners, operators, club professionals and superintendents. For this whitepaper, course owners and operators, golf car manufacturers and sources from the insurance industry were interviewed for their perspectives on vandalism and safeguarding a golf car fleet.



## Golf Cars Vandalism Nothing New

Golf car vandalism is, by no means, a new concern among golf course owners, operators, professionals and superintendents. While historical and statistical evidence is sketchy, it is safe to say that not long after golf cars began making their way onto golf courses some 50 years ago, mischief-minded teenagers, inebriated adults and revenge-seeking former employees have been abusing them. There is something about the low-speed, open-air vehicles that seems to bring to mind bumper cars at the county fairground and elicit ill-mannered and often criminal behavior in some.

Several years ago, “jackass: the movie,” an 80-minute homage to adolescent inanity featuring golf cars careening through bunkers and across greens, made a modest profit at the box office and created something of a cult following. But don’t count anyone who owns, manages or works at a golf course among the movie’s fans. Too many courses continue to pay a high price for copycat jackasses.

In Racine, Wis., several years ago, three men stole golf cars from the South Hills CC and drove them through a nearby wheat field. They ruined a farmer’s crop before crashing the vehicles into one another in a reenactment of the bumper car scene in “jackass.” More recently, charges were filed against four teenagers in Muskegon, Mich., who commandeered golf cars and cut doughnuts into greens at the newly restored University Park Golf Course. The golf cars and a utility vehicle were driven into a creek, leaving the course with an estimated \$50,000 in damages.

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Those are among the numerous acts of golf course vandalism each year that cause millions of dollars in damages. (There are no official estimates for the damage caused by vandalism, but officials at Club Car, the Augusta, Ga.-based manufacturer of golf cars and utility vehicles used on golf courses, say the amount could easily top \$8 million a year.)

According to Joel Willis, program director of Clubsurance, a division of The Commonwealth Insurance Group, which provides property and casualty coverage to golf courses, “Golf course vandalism is a growing problem across the country. Vehicle and equipment replacement costs, plus lost revenues if the course has to shut down for repairs or prepare temporary greens, make these kinds of incidents an owner’s worst nightmare.” Repeated incidents could also prompt an increase in insurance premiums, according to Willis.

Whether inspired by the movie that one critic called “possibly the most irresponsible picture ever released by a major studio,” too many beers, or the false perception that vandalism is a victimless prank, the hooligans can’t seem to resist golf car shenanigans.

Some have suggested a sense of entitlement motivates some of the vandals. “People seem to think of a golf course as public property, and their taxes paid for it, so they can do whatever they want to one,” said Dick Neumann Superintendent of Highlands Golf Club in Lincoln, Neb.

*“From an economic standpoint, the real damage occurs after the act itself because damaged golf cars and plowed up greens can cripple a course days, if not weeks.”*

## Vandalism Costs Go Beyond Act Itself

Seemingly everyday this nightmare visits golf courses across the country. According to a study conducted in 2002 by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, more than 85 percent of golf courses have experienced vandalism. While the study did not break out the different types of vandalism, it is logical to assume, based on daily news items across the country, that much of the vandalism involved golf cars.

A few week’s worth of Google searches turned up the following headlines:

- Dec. 16, 2008, New York: “Another Country Club Vandal Sentenced.”
- Dec. 18, 2008, Illinois: “6 Golf Carts Stolen From Country Club.”
- Dec. 19, 2008, Kansas: “Suspects Sought in Golf Course Vandalism Case.”
- Jan. 6, 2009, Ohio: “Two Teens Sentenced in Golf Course Vandalism.”
- Jan. 7, 2009, Louisiana: “Teens Arrested For Damaging Golf Course With Cars.”

Five vandals who attacked the Thibodaux Bayou Country Club in Louisiana damaged the course, stuck three golf cars in a mud hole and ran another two into a canal on the course. Another group of five who vandalized the Hawthorne Hills Country Club in Ohio tipped 52 golf cars, set fire to 14 and damaged six others. In a separate incident in Kansas, a group of teens broke into the golf car storage area, sunk two golf cars in a pond and scattered members’ property across the course. Costs to the courses in these three examples ranged from \$14,500 to \$100,000, according to authorities and course personnel.

“Unfortunately, vandalism seems to be on the rise in many areas,” said Mike Read, director of marketing for Club Car. “But from an economic standpoint, some of the costliest damage can occur after the act itself because damaged golf cars and plowed up greens can cripple a course days, if not weeks.”

While a golf facility’s property insurance may cover the cost of the damage, a vast majority of vandalism cases go unreported because the damage totals less than the course’s deductible. Even if the policy pays for the damage to the cars and property, the actual cost of vandalism can be much greater.

An incident at the Corning Country Club in Corning, N.Y., forced the club to close nine holes and cut back a tournament scheduled for LPGA volunteers. With fewer holes and golf cars available, the facility experienced a decline in revenue until the golf cars were replaced and the course was repaired.

The reported costs of such incidents often omit the unbudgeted but significant labor costs accumulated by superintendents and their staffs to make repairs.

After an incident at The Woodlands Country Club in Spring, Texas, Eric Bauer, director of grounds at the Woodlands Development Co., told TurfNet, an online publication aimed at course superintendents, “It’s frustrating. We work really hard and put in endless hours to maintain the surfaces for our members and their guests. It can be completely destroyed within a matter of minutes.”

### Thwarting Vandals No Easy Task

As all politics is said to be local, so is vandalism. And many owners and operators don’t acknowledge vandalism as a serious issue until it happens at their facility. That’s when they are moved to act.

Following several incidents of vandalism at the Green Garden Country Club in Chicago, the club installed video-camera surveillance of the golf car fleet. The video system captured vandals stealing two golf cars and returning 20 minutes later to grab two more. They came back later for two more. The whole thing was captured on video, which provided law enforcement plenty of help in nabbing the vandals, but it did nothing to prevent the damage.

Other facilities add higher fences to the property, bigger locks and chains to the storage facility and post nightly security patrols. These methods, though, aren’t completely effective in thwarting vandals.

“I think we’ll put a fence around the cars,” said assistant superintendent Rick Caruso after his course Riverwoods Golf Course in Akron, Ohio was vandalized early last year. “I don’t know what else to do.” A few weeks later, the course was struck again.

As one insurance executive who deals with a number of golf courses notes, even the best-laid plans to thwart vandals are sometimes not enough.

“You can put locks on the gates and try to make sure the premises are secure throughout the day, but if someone wants to vandalize, they’re going to vandalize,” says Brian Fisher, national programs coordinator for the Davis-Garvin insurance agency in Columbia, S.C.

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“Now most courses have cart barns that are locked up and secure. They have spent the money to do that. That’s one of the questions we ask: How do you secure your fleet?”

“Obviously, a wide open fleet, whether it’s chained down or however it might be secured, is very susceptible to vandalism. To spend the extra money on a cart barn is well worth the time and money, especially in terms of us viewing it as a favorable risk,” Fisher says.

## Vandalism Solutions Going High-Tech

After years of dealing with vandalism without much success, some owners and operators are rethinking their approach and are looking for more creative solutions. Some courses have borrowed the neighborhood watch idea from suburbia and are asking residents of the communities surrounding their course to report evidence of vandalism.

Other courses are turning to the latest technology in their efforts to stop vandals. A club in Illinois recently installed a device originally designed for jewelry

stores called SmokeCloak in its pro shop. Upon detection of an intruder, the system fills a room with a thick, disorientating fog and secures the facility until authorities arrive.

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Others are focusing on the golf car fleet itself, believing as Club Car’s Read puts it, “If you can stop the source of their fun, odds are you’ll come close to eliminating the damage.”

Club Car’s new GPS-based Guardian SVC (Satellite Vehicle Control) system gives course managers the ability to shut down their fleets at the end of the day with a few quick clicks on their computer.

While the capabilities of the Guardian system go beyond deterring vandalism, Club Car created the system (in cooperation with GPS Industries of Sarasota, Fla.) partially in response to their customers’ vandalism concerns.

## ‘Shocking’ Statistics

Before designing the Guardian system, Club Car commissioned a national survey to find out what owners and operators considered their most critical business challenges. According to the survey, operators’ chief concerns are keeping vehicles on the cart path during cart-path-only periods, safeguarding riders, golfers playing additional holes without the pro shop’s knowledge, damage to cars, vandalism and accidents resulting from golf cars being driven into unsafe areas.

“These are all issues that directly affect operating expenses,” Read said.

Among the survey findings were several statistics that underlined the critical nature of the problem for owners and operators:

- 72 percent of courses reported vandalism or golfers playing extra holes without paying a green fee.
- 27 percent said they had retrieved a vandalized golf car from a lake or creek.
- 48 percent reported unauthorized use of golf cars.
- 42 percent reported golf cars being driven in restricted properties.
- 21 percent reported theft of golf cars.

Read called the statistics “shocking” and added that “there’s no doubt about the need for something to help courses lower vandalism incidence.”

One of the first golf facilities to introduce the Guardian system, the Country Club of Blue Springs in Blue Springs, Mo., has already experienced a decrease in accidental and deliberate incidents of vandalism, according to Head PGA Professional Rick Holtcamp. Holtcamp said the Guardian's action zone feature, which allows him to identify specific areas where he wants to limit golf car access, is keeping the club's golf cars on club property.

"We've seen the number of complaints from property owners decrease," Holtcamp noted. "And been able to do a better job protecting areas where golfer shouldn't be driving."

### **Discuss Options, Solutions with Club Car**

Vandalism will always be a costly and painful concern for course owners, operators, superintendents and club professionals. But with the introduction of course management systems such as Club Car's Guardian SVC course management solution, there are new options to consider when deciding how best to protect your facility.

Before making a decision, owners and operators are encouraged to talk to a Club Car sales representative, dealer or distributor who can help them review their options in light of their own situation.

"Obviously, golf cars are not doing the course any good if they're being repaired or at the bottom of a lake because of an act of vandalism," Club Car's Read said. So we want to do everything we can to help our customers keep their golf cars on the course and in the hands of responsible golfers, as opposed to irresponsible vandals."

