

You can golf in 47 states, and Massachusetts isn't one of them

By **Steve Marantz** Globe correspondent, Updated May 5, 2020, [an hour ago](#)



Joe Marin at Franklin Country Club, where he is a member but cannot play right now. COURTESY/JOE MARIN

Golf is a game of frustration. Any golfer who has lipped out a 3-foot putt — which is every golfer — knows the feeling.

But golfers love their frustration, and are even more frustrated without it. With the game shut down in Massachusetts since March 23 because of COVID-19, the frustration of

thousands of golfers is boiling over.

That's because they see golf as one of the few sports, or outdoor activities, that is relatively safe from contagion — viral if not mental.

“It's a social distancing sport by nature; you're on a 200-acre property with at most 72 other people,” says Joe Marin, an avid golfer from Franklin. “You can't go to a hiking trail and stay 6 feet away from other hikers. But you can easily distance on a golf course.”

Golfers believe the sport can be played — with explicit and enhanced precautions — to minimize the risk of virus transmission. Governors in 47 states have agreed. But Governor Charlie Baker does not — so far.

Which explains why Marin is pushing an online petition titled “Please Let Massachusetts Golf” on [change.org](https://www.change.org) that seeks to allow golf to resume play in Massachusetts. The petition, which started in March, was close to 40,000 signatures Monday.

“I can't understand Massachusetts being this late in the game,” Marin said. “I sent the petition to the governor's office on April 23. It had 27,000 signatures at that time. Got no response. Getting more signatures every day — lots more.”

Baker, at his press conference Monday, said his advisory panel on reopening met with golf industry representatives over the weekend.

“They came in to visit and their presentation is being taken under consideration,” said Baker.



A protester at the State House Monday had a one-word message for the governor. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

Meanwhile, the 39-year old Marin has become the voice of the “liberate golf” movement. Married, a father of two, and employed in “customer service and relationship management” for a software company, Marin belongs to Franklin Country Club and plays 60-80 rounds a season.

“I’m not doing this on behalf of my club, though it certainly wants golf open,” said Marin. “A lot of people look at golf as elitist because of the private country clubs, but it’s way beyond that. Golfers are a unique class. There’s an addiction level to this crazy sport.

“I’m speaking on behalf of the common voice, people like myself who are passionate about golf. I want to help because I feel it’s a good cause and I want people to be safe and healthy. I don’t want lives to be lost, but there’s no evidence people are infecting one another on golf courses.”

Marin says his advocacy for golf should not be taken as a political statement or as criticism of Baker.

“Our governor is taking precautions he feels are necessary and he’s done a decent job,” said Marin. “I just think he doesn’t have a vested interest in the sport and it doesn’t have his attention.”

But Baker should pay attention, advocates contend, and not only because the game is outdoors and played with requisite distancing. The golf industry has an estimated \$2.8 billion economic impact in Massachusetts — about half coming from the game and half from related commerce, according to We Are Golf, a coalition of industry stakeholders. The industry generates about 29,630 jobs spread among 375 golf courses and related products and services.

Meanwhile, Bay State golfers are spending their money in Connecticut, where the courses are open to all regardless of residence. Marin drove to Windham, Conn., Saturday with three golf buddies.

“That’s \$180 that could be spent in our state,” said Marin.

Another destination is Maine, which opened its courses Friday. Rhode Island’s courses are also open but off-limits to out-of-state golfers.

The shutdown is a financial debacle, according to course operators such as Steve Murphy, whose company is the franchisee for municipal courses in Lynn (Gannon) and Beverly (Beverly Golf & Tennis) and manages the city course for North Reading (Hillview). Federal bailout funds have not made up for his losses.

“We owe the city of Lynn \$480,000 and we’ll be asking them for some relief,” Murphy said. “I’ve made partial payments to Lynn and Beverly because I don’t have the full payment. So far they’ve been patient. Some Gannon members will be asking me for money back on their dues, and I don’t have it unless I get money from the city.

“North Reading is different; they pay me to run Hillview. They’re assuming I’m getting [federal] PPP money, so they want money back from me — saying I’m double dipping. I’ve got so many hands in my pockets I’m running out of pockets.”

Lost weekend revenue at Hillview, in good weather, can amount to \$25,000, he said. Lost revenues from cart rentals at Gannon can amount to \$8,000-\$9,000 on a sunny weekend day.

“Our courses are full of dog walkers and they’re within 6 feet of one another,” Murphy said. “If golfers get within 6 feet, they can get hit with the club. So they don’t. The only place they might get close is on the tee. But if people use their head, there are no issues.

“I’m so frustrated. And just disgusted.”



For now, Joe Marin practices with a net in his backyard. COURTESY/JOE MARIN

Amid the golf angst, the continuing shutdown has exposed the game's overseers to criticism. Chief among the targets is Mass Golf, a nonprofit that promotes amateur tournaments and provides handicapping data to 85,000 members and 360 courses. Mass Golf is one of 17 organizations that partnered to form the Allied Golf Associations of New England/Northeast to advocate for golfers and the industry.

Mass Golf, and its executive director, Jesse Menachem, are portrayed in some golf media and social media as passive and ineffectual in their advocacy. Tom Gorman, who publishes an independent golf newsletter, newengland.golf, wrote, "Not only does Mass Golf not know what to do, they don't know how to advocate and deliver a message to a Governor engaged in an unprecedented government overreach, that is not only bankrupting part of the \$2.8 billion golf industry, but hundreds of other small and mid-sized businesses."

In a statement posted Saturday on the Mass Golf website, Menachem defended his efforts.

"We've worked countless days, countless hours to support this industry," said Menachem. "You have to understand that Massachusetts has been in an extreme position with Covid cases and the pandemic. We've been respectful of that, but now it's on our industry to make sure we're taking the appropriate next steps to work with the advisory board and open up golf."

But Baker's comments yesterday did little to lift the hopes or assuage the frustration of Bay State golfers.

"After listening to him, I'm thinking no sooner than Memorial Day," said Marin. "Tough pill to swallow."

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