

NO GOLFER LEFT BEHIND INITIATIVE

On the Private Side, Promoting Golf with More Energy, New Ideas and Standout Service

By David Gould, GBN Special Correspondent

The golf industry's "macro" stats from recent years paint a bleak picture of shrinking participation. For the golf professional at a private club, those numbers matter for the long-term future of the game, but they can also hit close to home. The golf professionals of old knew it was up to them to build excitement into the game for their members. To **Bob Watson**, the influential PGA member who ran the show at Westchester (N.Y.) Country Club with such flair, it was a matter of "pro + motion = promotion." Translation: You had to bring consistent energy to the golf program in order to build your numbers and make the program a big winner for the club.

An important theme running through Golf Business Network presentations and articles this year is "No Golfer Left Behind," at the club level. There are always new ideas on how to fulfill that mission—some generated by GBN members, some from other sources.

An example of the latter comes from the writings of **Scott Duke**, consultant and founder of the Business Golf Advisory Group. Duke (author of "How to Play Business Golf") recently laid out action steps aimed at increasing member engagement and building the new-member pipeline. He cites his own survey showing that three-fourths of members at a typical club are on familiar terms with only a small cluster of their fellow members—just about 10 percent. The time is coming, he says, for creating private social-media websites where members can post and share their activities and interests. Duke also suggests that club websites gear themselves more toward potential members. "Classy imaging is okay," he says, but "more sociable content is what the potential member is after." Duke advises creating websites that answer this question: "What is the mood and what are the attitudes of the club's current member-

ship?" Such a tack would promote more inquiries, which would be acted on by having a club representative reach out to the potential candidate. At many clubs the more formal traditions of recruitment currently prevent this type of activity, but Duke says the culture is changing and those traditions may not endure into the future.

Every season brings a new chance to enliven golf participation. While enduring setbacks due to very wet spring weather, **Dave Coates** of Essex County Country Club in West Orange, NJ, saw positive early results from several innovations aimed at that goal. One simple but

intriguing tactic involved communication with tournament fields via email. Beginning this year, the Essex County golf staff is sending out a pre-event email about one week prior, showing a list of signed-up members and highlighting the attractive elements of the tourney.

"It uses the power of suggestion to get people who had not yet signed up thinking they'd enjoy being out there with that group," says Coates. The email has also been a good reminder to entrants as to why they registered—even *that* they registered. "It puts the responsibility back on them to not conveniently forget about the event, or come around later saying they told somebody on the golf staff they were needing to scratch," says Coates.

Michael Rymer, also a GBN member and head professional at The Members Club at Four Streams in Beallsville, Maryland, has built the club's tournament

program to a productive level but is always looking for ways to get more members involved. To Rymer it's important that the Four Streams member knows his head pro really wants to see him enjoying golf at the club. "More and more I've taken it upon myself to contact members directly about upcoming events," says Rymer. Sometimes it's a newer member, in other cases one of longer standing who seems to need (and want) a bit of prodding. "You end up serving as a concierge or social



What will it take to keep these carts filled with golfers?

director,” says Rymer. “There’s a tradition of that in terms of casual play, but we’d like to bring it to the level where they’re competing in tournaments.” Many observers would say that if you can do that, the regular social play will take care of itself.

Tournaments can be a prime focus for promoting rounds and member engagement, but that includes taking steps to augment or tweak the schedule and formats. **Sean English**, teaching professional at Cincinnati, Ohio’s Kenwood Country Club, says the golf at this 36-hole facility did exactly that for 2011. The move was a subtle one—taking a standard weekday evening format and dropping it into Saturday morning. “We framed it to the members as a ‘Saturday morning league,’” says English. “It’s low-key, you sign yourself up, and our staff pros play in some of the foursomes.” The most important facet of the event involved newer members and their comfort zones. The league concept gets people onto the course on a weekend morning, with built-in camaraderie and pro-staff presence. That’s a great leg up for members who haven’t yet found their niche and really gotten into the network.

Matt Walsh, a GBN member at Mt. Pleasant Country Club, Boylston, Mass., upped the fun element for this year’s marquee invitational tournament in late July. One wildly popular game added to the festivities is called “corn-hole,” a horseshoes-type competition with beanbags thrown at a tilted plywood surface that has a hole in the center. After dark it was Glo-ball golf, with closest-to-the-pin, longest-drive and an obstacle putting course. Tiki torches lined the playing area, pop music played from loudspeakers, bars were set up and golfers in the tourney field were out until 11 pm competing at these various games of skill. The Glo-ball putting contest was replete with water hazards, bunkers and ramps. One hole had a small fire that players had to negotiate. Walsh and club leaders were pleased with all the positive commentary from guests. Says Walsh: “Even guests from the New York metropolitan area were calling it the best event they had been to in a long time.” His credo is a simple one. “You have to separate yourself from everyone else, and that takes innovation.”

To bring in new crops of younger members is often a

goal, but that doesn’t mean forgetting about your long-time members. At Eagle Springs Golf Club outside Vail, Colorado, head professional **Mike Steiner** reports that revenues and play are up “32 percent across the board compared to 2010.” The credit is going in good part to changing tee markers—meaning, get golfers to break tradition and move up one set. “We implemented a club-wide effort called Tee it Forward,” says Steiner. “The median age here has gotten older, and to enjoy their golf our members had to take the hint and play a shorter golf course.”

As often happens in clubs, this required acceptance of the idea by the influential players. “It was a matter of getting the right people at the club to move up and play the course at 6,400 yards or so,” says Steiner. “We accomplished that and it really made the difference.”

At most exclusive clubs, the head professional’s Action Plan for the season will produce healthy numbers for guest revenue, dining, merchandise sales and other important numbers if the plan is well-executed. Long bouts of poor weather are the curveball that makes execution at times exceedingly difficult. At Fox Chapel on Pittsburgh’s north side, head professional **Alex Childs** charged his staff with doing everything possible to offset the poor weather that plagued much of April and May.

“Our response to those lost weeks was to reschedule everything we possibly could into later May and June,” says Childs. “Every time we had a justified reason to say, ‘Too bad that event or those lessons got rained out,’ we didn’t allow ourselves to say it. We re-booked everything and fit it all in somehow.”

Tony Traci, First Assistant Golf Professional at Allegheny Country Club, also in greater Pittsburgh, took on a similar challenge. His scenario is that of a golf director charged with expanding his staff’s efforts on behalf of the club by managing a new program of outside tournaments, mostly held on Mondays but a few on other weekdays as well. As a revenue stream, this effort “has been very helpful” to club leaders in their oversight of the club’s operation, according to Traci.

The future for golf participation at member-only golf clubs is sure to demand more innovation and extra effort—the “pro in motion,” in other words—whether as a creative planner or a leader determined to do whatever it takes to execute the plans that have been laid out.



Matt Walsh, a GBN member at Mt. Pleasant Country Club, Boylston, Mass., upped the fun element at his marquee event with a variety of novel games including obstacle golf replete with Tiki torches, ramps and water hazards.