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Who's in Charge of Growing the Game of Golf?

What Do We Need to Do About it?

THE GAME OF GOLF IS IN TROUBLE AND WE BETTER FIGURE WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT...FAST!

An alarmist, you say? Perhaps. But, it's really time to put on our thinking caps. We know why popularity in the game has dropped off so dramatically, and now we need to discover and develop solutions.

According to the National Golf Foundation, for the third consecutive year the number of golfers in the United States has declined...falling 3.6 percent to 26.1 millions in 2010.

That's a slide from 27.1 golfers a year earlier and wasn't totally unexpected in light of the impact the weak economy and recession has had on golf.

The NGF suggests the drop-off in participation perhaps is linked more closely to financial pressures rather than the game losing popularity among its adherents.

Certainly more emphasis is being placed on retaining golfers, once they're into the game.

But the fact remains, the downward trend remains – a decline, which has been happening ever since the game hit participation high around the turn of the century.

There's some consensus about the reasons why people are not playing golf – three major reasons. It's the cost of the game, the time needed to play a round and the difficulty of the game.

Steve Mona, CEO of the Florida-based World Golf Foundation says, “according to the latest data, the cost and time are now the top two reasons why people leave or don't play the game.”

Historically the main golf organizations like the PGA of America, The USGA and the royal and ancient club at Saint

■ So for golf to grow the fun has to be brought back into the game...it's not merely a matter of time or dollars and cents. If someone can't enjoy the game because they can't connect emotionally, they're not going to play. And most everyone has a different emotional reason of why or why they won't play. It's up to us as golf leaders to push the right buttons to get these golfers on the course. ■

Perhaps, but in my opinion, there's a combination of reasons, not all financial. And it's some of these other reasons that need to be addressed if the game is to thrive, whether it's at public, municipal, semi-private or private club courses.

Fact is, golf attracts new players every year and by the same token, the game, for a variety of reasons, loses more each year than it gains. The reasons run the gamut of players from men to women, kids, seniors and disabled golfers who want accessibility on and to courses.

Andrews have been the driving force for growing golf, explains Frank Gore, president of Gore Golf, and it hasn't been enough.

“Because the main organizations are so traditional most of the solutions have not been effective,” he opines. “For example, attempts have been made to grow golf among women but despite great effort very little progress has been made.

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“Programs for youth targeted at minorities and inner city kids have been well intentioned but have also not created a significant increase in golfers and at best is a very long term strategy.

“The problem lies more in the game itself,” Gore expounds. “The best of golf is also the worst of golf. Its rich traditions and strict rules and customs protect the game but also make it less attractive to a society that has little patience for things that take a long time to learn, a long time to play and a golf culture that wants new players but has little or no tolerance for beginners on the course.”

Time and cost may indeed be a factor, injected Rick Coyne, president of ClubMark Corporation, based in Palm Springs, CA. “But we need to be more tolerant of new players trying to learn the game.

Coyne indicated that the participation rate in Canada was over 23 percent, while at the same time the participation rate just south of the border was barely at 12 percent.

“The number of nine-hole courses, which allowed all levels of player to enjoy a peaceful round of golf, has been the reason. Whether it was or was not, we must learn to encourage new players, not intimidate them.

“We have allowed ourselves the misguided luxury of believing that golf’s ‘boom times’ will never end. We’ve become complacent, even lazy,” he opined.

So what’s to be done? Suggestions there are, but are they solutions?

“The entire golf industry as one has ownership over growing the game. We are all in it together,” explained PGA President Allen Wronowski. “It goes back to the principle that I like to call the ‘Power of 10.’

“If each person in the industry brings 10 people to the course this year, think of the exponential growth that we can generate – and how it will have a positive effect for everyone involved in the game!”

What’s the draw...different course designs, less cost, less time, or what?

There are some specific solutions maintains The World Golf Foundation’s Mona.

“There are facilities being designed for less than an 18-hole experience...for example, a 12-hole facility with four three-hole loops. That accomplishes the requirement for less time, because a golfer can play three, nine or 12 and it accomplishes the expense factor...paying for three, nine or 12 holes.

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“And we think these facilities are going to become more and more popular because they address some of the reasons why people leave the game,” he explained.

It’s also his contention this model, to some extent, applies to private clubs. Golfers at a private club are paying their initiation fees and dues, so “maybe the cost factor is addressed less. But time factor is addressed.

“People are stressed for time and while the club experience is different than a public course, clubs members face many of the same demands as other golfers— work, kids and getting them to different activities. I don’t know of anyone today working...they’re working harder.”

Mona also outlined a national strategy that seems to be meeting with some success. The WGF’s Get Golf Ready is a player development program designed to introduce adults to the game of golf in an affordable fast and fun manner.

“We need to remember golf is fun...we play it...not ‘work’ it.”

Now in its third year the program is offered at more than 1,500 facilities across the country, mostly public courses but there are private facilities that have embraced it. It’s a program of five group lessons, each 90 minutes long, with a maximum of eight golfers in each class with a set curriculum.

“We know it works. About 83 percent of the participants stay in after the first and 75 percent stay in it after that,” Mona explained, based on the first couple of years of data.

“It’s the way in which they’re introduced to the game that allows them to succeed,” Mona enthused. “It gives them the greatest chance to succeed.”

“We also teach etiquette and conventions of the game. Believe it or not, the number one question learners ask is: How much do I tip a bag or cart boy? They don’t ask playing questions.

“For so many it’s such a foreign experience. We have such a unique culture to our game and people don’t have any idea of the conventions of the game,” Mona explained.



“People don’t know what to do when they arrive...it’s a whole protocol. When somebody’s new to this, it’s a blur and they’re intimidated by it. They worry about what to do and we need to educate people about what to expect. It’s a shared experience.”

The PGA’s Wronowski says his organization has already formulated “a new strategic plan that involves the entire industry called Golf 2.0.

“The PGA of America has taken the lead on this exciting initiative to help ensure that the game appeals to the next generation of golfers – from juniors to females to minorities to ‘latent golfers’ (those that have played in the past and would like to come back to the game and play again) to avid players.

“Golf 2.0 reaches out to all demographics, as it utilizes a comprehensive grassroots design and innovative strategic vision to grow the game to 40 million golfers by 2020,” he explained. The role of the PGA has never been more important and “they will be the key drivers in rolling and promoting these new innovative concepts at their facilities.”

Wronowski agrees with others...”golf must adapt to the changing demands of the marketplace.”

So the PGA and United States Golf Association are implementing the “TEE IT FORWARD” initiative, based on a vision from Adams Golf founder Barney Adams.

It encourages golfers to move up to tees boxes more in line with their game.

“It also means accommodating the constraints many of us have in finding time to play, through programs that offer affordable three-hole, six-hole, nine-hole and 12-hole golf, as alternatives to the traditional 18,” Wronowski added.

“This also includes creating the golf equivalent of “bunny slopes” for new players and juniors, so they can learn the game at a relaxed pace (i.e. short courses; using family tees that are appropriate for the amateur player; and scheduling them for times of the day on the course when they do not feel pressure from avid golfers to maintain pace of play).”

“Golf can be affordable. We just have to market and price new concepts, such as a pay-per-hole rate, at a price that appeals to a new generation of players,” Wronowski maintains.

Others involved in the business of golf feels that it’s the courses and individuals who should ‘carry the ball’, so to speak, growing the game at a micro level.

“Courses should create ways for new golfers to get into the ‘game’ to play golf and do well in the game,” added Betsy Clark, president, National Alliance for Accessible Golf in Alexandria, VA.

“Too many times, instructors will teach the fundamentals of the game but leave it at that without the next step.

Golf instructors should include a transition into the game as part of their programs; show individuals what the next step is and how to play a round, as opposed to leaving the lesson on the range.

Make the approach to playing simple, successful and fun.

“It gives them good scoring opportunities, and makes for a shorter round. Short courses provide teachable moments and great practice for the scoring game in any golfers’ effort to get as good as they can.”

Charles King, director of instruction at Reynolds Plantation, Greensboro, GA, offers a different insight and approach, based on the ‘influencer’ model.

“The influencer starts with an outcome and for us that’s ‘Grow Golf,’ expounds King.

“We want to build skills, we want positive peer pressure, positive peer feedback, reward and accountability and we want to create a learning environment,” King added.

To make this happen, there are four vital behaviors. In golf that’s 1) getting people to hit with solid contact. “That’s the addict,” King enthused.

Secondly people need to take lessons to learn how this is done, followed by 3) deep practice and 4) feedback and follow-up.

In King’s opinion, finding some early success can create converts. “Sure we’ve had a decline in the game, I get that. But if I’m truly addicted to the game, hitting the ball solidly, I’ll find the time and money,” says King, who offers golfers assistance through his on-line video series and at Reynolds Plantation.

While different teaching methods may offer some solace, there are some other suggestions.

“Two main strategies, if implemented could grow golf and grow it rather quickly,” maintains Frank Gore. “The first is creating a quicker easier form of golf focused on beginners and those that do not have the time or patience to learn or play the traditional game of golf.

“The second is to make golf more appealing to the Hispanic community the fastest growing population in our country who traditionally do not play the game of golf.

“The golf professional could play a greater role and could be the true solution but must change their focus.

Today they are part of the problem,” Gore lamented. “The environment at most courses from the professional staff is one of arrogance especially towards beginners.

“Have you ever heard a famous golf teacher advertise they could teach beginners to play faster than anyone in the country?” Gore queried.

“Golf needs to take a lesson from the ski industry, and other youth sports where the field is scaled to the ability of

the participant,” suggests Dan Van Horn, president and founder of U.S. Kids Golf.

A simple message promoting 9-hole rounds would do much to eliminate time issues that plague the industry.

“There is a need for two things: an introductory program that provides incentives to continue as well as additional tees at manageable distances for beginners. It is important that new golfers feel success and enjoy the game in the sampling phase or they will likely never return.” A point reiterated over and over again.

People with disabilities represent a high population group in America. About one in every five American has a disability, according to the most recent census, explained the National Alliance for Accessible Golf's Clark.

“Attracting this population to the game of golf is not just good business, as it represents 51 million people, but it's also just the right thing to do,” Clark proclaimed.

“Golf courses should strive to make their courses accessible, and a great way to start is to encourage their teaching professionals to learn how best to teach the game of golf to individuals with a variety of disabilities.

“Having access to single rider golf cars in another way courses can promote play for individuals with mobility disabilities.

The National Alliance for Accessible Golf (Alliance) houses a wealth of information on accessible golf.

“Specifically, the Alliance has created toolkits for golf course owners and operators as well as individuals to create accessible opportunities.”

Information about these programs, resources, and grants for golf programs for people with disabilities, is available at www.accessgolf.org.

PUBLISHER'S FINAL THOUGHTS

So the fact is, many of these organizations and individuals hit upon some of the same solutions...easier courses, less cost, a less intimidating game for beginners, teaching methods, and a golf package that takes less time and cost less money.

It's great that many of the associations are working hard to grow the game.

But this discussion though, is completely void of any emotional factors influencing golfers. Yet ‘emotion’ has as much to do with people playing or not playing golf.

Really why do people play; why are they drawn to golf? Is it for the challenge of the game or for the social time spent with friends, family and/or business associates? The high touch with high tech?

Many will or want to play because of the emotional draw...the ‘feel good’ time they spend with friends, or business associates.

But some of the factors expressed by our experts mitigate this emotional experience because of the intimidation factor, a lack of understanding of the golf culture, there's no ‘addictor’ and there's little or no tolerance for someone who isn't a scratch golfer.

So for golf to grow the fun has to be brought back into the game...it's not merely a matter of time or dollars and cents.

If someone can't enjoy the game because they can't connect emotionally, they're not going to play.

And most everyone has a different emotional reason of why or why they won't play.

It's up to us as golf leaders to push the right buttons to get these golfers on the course.

I believe we at the club level can make the biggest difference.

DOES YOUR CLUB HAVE A PLAN TO GROW THE GAME?

As a club owner, here are some of my suggestions, because there's always the base I believe we need to have at our clubs today...and that's the family (Dad, Mom and

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the kids, all of whom we need to entice and keep interested in the game of golf).

We should have beginner tees 50 to 100 yards from the hole, a family tee box, fun tournaments and competitive tournaments for kids. This way kids can have success early, and as Charles King suggests earlier in this story, being able to hit the ball becomes the addictor.

We should open up our clubs to the public during the summer for junior golf camps, and set aside an hour later in the afternoon when the public can participate in the summer program.

Time is also an issue; we must introduce 9-hole tournaments and nine-hole play.

That means busy people still need two hours to play, but perhaps the half marathon is the answer to the full marathon. It will keep golfers engaged and committed.

We need to work with the local schools. How can your club help schools, particularly high school golf teams, play better golf? Offer them limited use of your club practice facility.

And it's not the time to give up on women golfers. We have made golf very challenging for many players especially women, and it continues to be a somewhat untapped market. But to start with ladies should have the same benefits as men, including access to tee time and for example, multiple tee boxes.

If men play from three tee boxes, why not the ladies? So look in the mirror, does your club have a specific program to entice ladies to first of all, play the game and secondly to become better players?

Much of what we're talking about starts with your golf professionals. Get them out of the pro shop and on the lesson tee box. It's a waste of talent having them sell shirts and book tee times when they should be helping your members enjoy the game.

CREATES RETENTION

I believe we should pay our professional a little more money and at the same time offer our members free lessons. Why, you ask? Why not??

The fact is usage creates retention...and retention means fewer memberships to sell. So, the more our members enjoy the game and play, all the better it is for our clubs in retaining and recruiting members.

Right now, we are dangerously close to pricing ourselves out of the marketplace with dues.

At what point do your members stop to question their commitment to the club? When they don't see the value for the dues they pay.

And on the other hand how many prospective members won't join your club because they can't justify the dues? Is that a cost you've calculated?

It's been really interesting owning a club. The first thing I realized is we could be much more efficient, and the efficiency will save money. We've reduced our water bill by \$150,000, electricity by \$55,000, cut are maintenance staff budget by \$240,000, and a halt to reseeding has saved another \$80,000.

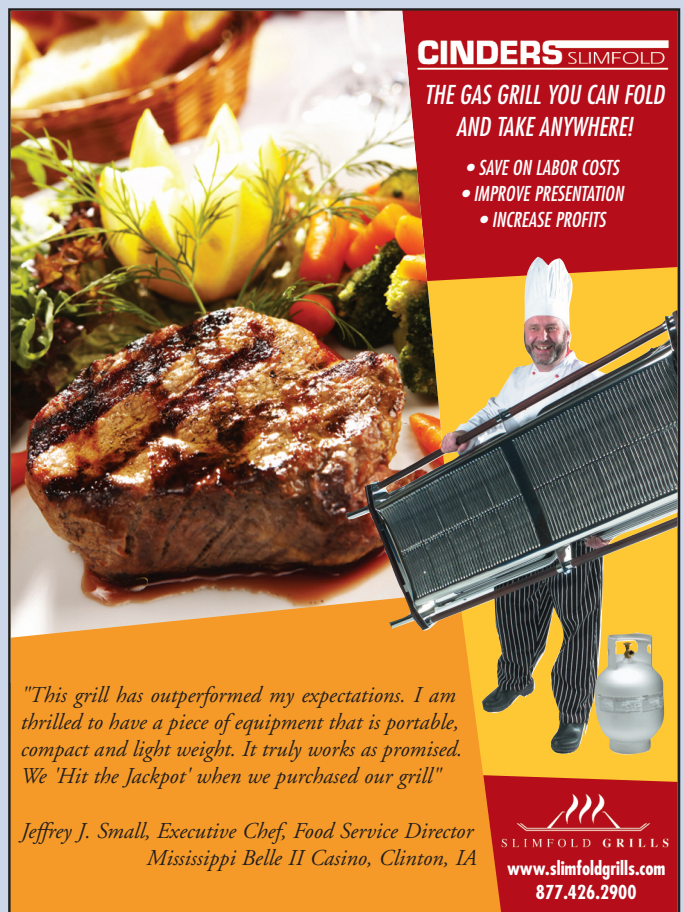
We grow our own vegetables and by only opening for dinner three times per week instead of five, we've been able to cut our clubhouse staff. Limited dinner menu has also reduced wasted food – changes that have saved over \$700,000 a year. That's a \$150 month per member that we would have had to charge, or put another way, \$150 a month that makes it more affordable for us to retain our members.

As with many clubs today, we have to work hard to make sure our dues don't spin out of control into that dreaded death spiral.

At least that's the way I see it! **BR**

John G. Fornaro, publisher

If you have comments on this article or suggestions for other topics, please contact John Fornaro at (949) 376-8889, ext. 4 or 105 or via email: johnf@apcd.com



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