

FIRST SHOT IN THE BATTLE TO SAVE CLUBS

THE TIMEBOMB
SCOTTISH CLUB GOLF'S
DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS PART 3

Hilton Park phase out cheap golf for the oldies and appoint a director of golf.
Douglas Lowe reports

In the battle to beat an ever-ageing membership, an issue that is seriously affecting most private members' golf clubs in Scotland, Hilton Park is already a couple of holes up on most. For a start, they have reached a compromise agreement with their senior membership that has brought the fraught matter of subsidised memberships under control. They have also taken a big step towards rejuvenating the club by attracting many of the critical 20-40 age group out of the wilderness and into the fold.

The result is a membership that has increased by 233 to 1454 over the last two years and visitor numbers have more than doubled, enabling a £100,000 upgrading of the clubhouse and a £300,000 replacement of cutting equipment for their two courses.

The club, near Milngavie, is proclaimed on their website – which has been a key tool in turning the club around – to be on the edge of Rob Roy country. The current fight might be far more peaceful than the Jacobite guerilla's efforts to protect Highland values, but there is just as much passion in evolving the golfing way of life.

A pioneer, moreover, in the form of general manager Gordon Simpson, has been appointed. He is the first professional golfer in Britain to have graduated with the qualification of PGA Director of Golf and he has not been slow to brandish his broadsword of business initiatives at the old-fashioned principles behind the one-time ailing accounts.

First, the seniors issue. Even before Simpson arrived just more than two years ago there had been a concession among those who qualified for free golf through long-standing membership. They agreed to up their contribution from a fat zero to a 25% subscription.

There was also a 65-and-over membership that paid a 50% subscription and between the two categories they were totalling almost 200, with a further 90 due over the next three years and even bigger waves of prospective pensioners behind them.

Amid resignations galore from the younger ranks, the club's courses and clubhouse were crumbling just as much as the games of the ageing swingers, and despite that concession by the life members, the long-term financing of the club was recognised as being out of control. The demographic timebomb was about to blow.



Picture: Martin Shields

The club's tsunami of seniors were alerted to the horrors of the demography before the last annual general meeting and the proposal they faced was to cap these two categories at a fixed total of 150, representing about 10% of the total membership. The breakdown of 90 paying 50% and 60 paying 25% could vary, but beyond the 150 there would have to be a waiting list.

"Although there were some questions asked by the seniors, it went through reasonably smoothly, because by that time they knew that not only were we trying to stabilise the golf club and make it go forward but also they knew they were still getting a pretty good deal in comparison to a younger guy having to pay a full fee," said Simpson.

"If things had carried on as they were it would have left the club in a poor financial position and drastic action might have had to be taken. Now we

are getting to a situation where we have control of the budgets and the numbers rather than just being open-ended."

It remains the case that the younger members are subsidising the older ones, but hearteningly the crumbles showed they were open to persuasion by partly giving up what they regarded as their constitutional rights for the long-term security of the club, and there is a sweetener for those who make it to 80. They are eligible to play as much as they like for the equivalent of a clubhouse membership.

"Not only has that created movement on the waiting list, but it also gives the guys who reach that age a bit bigger of a thank you. While we understand we have taken something away from the seniors in their eyes we are also looking to give them back in one respect as well," said Simpson, who believes that subsidised memberships will be phased

out altogether in time because nobody joining since 2005 has been eligible for these categories.

The Scottish Golf Union believe there are some 250,000 unattached golfers in Scotland, mostly in the missing 20-40 age group, and Hilton Park are well down the line in shepherding these players, especially with the seniors issue under control.

"Effectively, younger players had been subsidising the fees of close to 200 members who could play two, three, four and five times a week," said Simpson. "Quite probably it put a lot of them off joining. They have so many other commitments with family and work, and some are not earning so much money."

The club embarked on a campaign to make the place more attractive. Out went the rigid old rules of jacket, collar and tie. Heaven forbid, jeans and trainers are now allowed in what was once a great

bastion of perceived respectability, or what others might call snobbery. "The dress code has been significantly reduced to attract more people to come with wives, girlfriends and young children," said Simpson. "Males and females can go in all three lounges and the only real segregation is for junior members, who can't go into certain lounges for licensing reasons."

"We have tried to make it more user-friendly, so that people can simply pop in, and if they are wearing jeans, that's OK, as long as they don't go on to the course in denims."

The club, furthermore, created a marketing budget for the first time and rebranded the club with a new logo. An advertising campaign was backed up by a leaflet drop, while the club's website was upgraded not only as key element of the membership drive but also to keep members updated.

Simpson breaks new ground for club pros

GORDON Simpson is the first in a new breed of golf professionals who are extending their influence far beyond the traditional image of providing lessons and selling equipment from the club shop.

He is the first professional to graduate with the qualification of PGA Director of Golf that is likely to become more common as clubs recognise that the traditional way of running affairs primarily by a voluntary committee is outdated and often inefficient.

The former pro at Newmachar in the north-east has been general manager at Hilton Park for more than two years, looking after the professional shop as his own business, but first and foremost regards himself as an employee of the club.

"During my time here the British PGA have seen the change in the culture in the golf industry and the need for PGA pros to develop in the industry, broaden their horizons and take on board the management and marketing of golf clubs," he said.

Earlier this year, he was first to come out of an all-encompassing PGA course that has included people development, finance, marketing and course management.

"The course is aimed at PGA professionals who want a long-term future in the industry," he said. "It will be driven by need. More and more golf clubs have to take on board the idea that a club is a business."

"We still have a captain and committee, but the committee is only nine people instead of 15. Whereas committee members used to instruct the staff, now it is the opposite. I do reports for the committee. It is my job to get the quotes, whether for course machinery or clubhouse, and present my case for approval or otherwise."

Because of Hilton Park's success in turning finances around, Simpson has been receiving a welter of requests from other clubs for advice.

"I'm happy to provide that as long as it is done in the correct way and they are not asking me to backstab their secretary or professional. I would never get myself into such a situation," he assured.

DOUGLAS LOWE

Annual open days have been held in the autumn with incentives to join on that day only, a ploy that has brought 120 members in the last two years, the majority in the 25 to 40 age group. An intermediate category for the 18 to 26 age range has also been established, while packages for husband and wife and families have been introduced. "We see ourselves as a family club," said Simpson, whose arrival is the result of a committee decision that the management structure needed to change.

Simpson is in total charge of the clubhouse, courses, professional's shop and the club's 20 staff, reversing the procedure where voluntary and often ill-qualified committee members instructed employees. "That was the first step in what they saw as a way of running the golf club more like a business," he said.

"Then we had to get the courses into a state that was sellable. We had a lot of

moss, there were drainage problems, the presentation wasn't at its best and at that time we were losing members hand over fist.

"The next thing we had to do was control costs. With each head of department, we looked at putting tenders out for contracts that were up for renewal and we found that there were huge savings to be made by just going out to the market place and negotiating."

"I think in golf clubs you get friendly with certain suppliers and you just roll with them for years. The club had fallen into a rut and we had to get out of that rut."

That rut has clearly gone. Improved conditions are testimony to that, and probably most important of all, the seniors can look their fellow members in the eye and enjoy mutual respect.

douglas.lowe@theherald.co.uk

VIEWPOINT

Leave the older members alone, lack of leadership is to blame for club golf crisis

I WRITE to apologise for still being alive and to plead guilty to benefiting from a reduced subscription from my golf club, and for still enjoying the wonderful heritage of our many fine Scottish golf courses on which we play in the various senior open competitions during the golfing year.

That so many senior golfers have survived to reach retirement age can hardly come as a surprise – stop smoking, drink less alcohol, eat fewer fried carbohydrates, eat five pieces of fruit daily, and take more exercise – is this not the recommended recipe for a healthy old age?

Those of us lucky enough to survive now apparently qualify for criticism and vilification on an age basis for simply being here and enjoying our golf!

Let me suggest that your golf correspondent has the wrong end of the stick; there are not too many older golfers in golf clubs, there are far too few younger people and families. We do not need, and will not get, fewer older golfers. We do need far more younger golfers and their families.

The so-called demographic time bomb did not appear out of the blue. Golf clubs and the SGU have had over 40 years to take action. Most intelligent people have known for years that around 2010 there would be a marked surge in the numbers qualifying for the state pension.

What have golf clubs and the SGU been doing for the past 20 or 30 years to prepare for the increase in the number of older golfers who would be around now and whose numbers can only increase?

The SGU will receive about £1.5m from adult male golfers in the next year – similar amounts from golf club members have been

available in earlier years. None of this has been used to ascertain the size of the financial problem which was always going to confront clubs from now on and which is now being laid unfairly at the door of the elderly.

A relatively inexpensive exchange of letters with the secretaries of affiliated clubs could have ascertained the numbers involved and provided a basis for sensible action. There has been an appalling lack of leadership over the years and it is not good enough to now blame the older members who have been loyal members of clubs for many years.

Is ageism now acceptable?
John A Maxwell, Bearsden

I TAKE great exception to the inference that the average golf club has become a 'cut-price pensioners' party'. Golf clubs have been built up over the years by people like myself (one of the baby boomers) who enjoy their golf and the competition and self-satisfaction it brings (as well as the healthy exercise) and the wonderful social aspect.

It has to be pointed out that not all clubs (if many) give up to 50% discount at age 65 and most members have to be a member for at least 30 if not 40 years before becoming 'life members'.

The idea that 'senior' golfers have established a network that allows them to bring guests to the club for discounted green fees etc etc is totally wrong since any member can bring a guest for the same discounted rate. Similarly Open Days are just that – open to all who wish to play and the cost is set by the host club.

Many well-deserving charities benefit greatly from these days.

It has been recognised in this day and age with the

competition from health club memberships etc that golf clubs need to appeal to the younger player who, nowadays, works in many cases longer hours than previously and, in the case of ladies, juggle with a young family and a business life too.

To help with this, there is now a nine-hole competition allowing those who are 'clock watching' the possibility of maintaining their handicap in two hours, instead of having to play 18 holes (four hours or more). Junior members have the opportunity to benefit from group lessons from their professional, experience team involvement and hopefully county golf, going on to Scottish teams if the talent is there.

Yes, I agree, we need to throw out the stiff collar and tie attitude and make the clubs more welcoming to families, and many clubs have done just that, but to blame the over 65s is a bit below the belt.

Jean Smith, Cathcart Castle GC Lady Associate

If we buy groceries, or any other commodity in bulk, we get discounts. Many providers of goods and services offer loyalty bonuses. AFTER 40 years of paying very substantial fees at my golf club, I feel entitled, when I can least afford to pay subs, to the reduced-cost loyalty bonus for which I've qualified.

I'm grateful to Douglas Lowe for revealing the SGU's plans, and thus, the underlying greed. Call it self-interest, but grey turkey club members won't vote for Christmas. We won't be denied our sport for what few years we may have left.

David Findlay, via email

Selling cheap life memberships irresponsible

DOUGLAS Lowe paints an accurate and chilling picture of the life membership time bomb for golf clubs. However, he does not mention a significant factor, which is about to deepen the gloom.

Over the years, some club committees, desperate to balance the books, have unbelievably sold life memberships for grossly inadequate lump sum payments.

This move, which can be described, at best, as irresponsible, is a significant addition to the number of life members who "have earned it".

The money raised has long since been spent, and

all that remains is fewer members paying larger annual subscriptions until the critical mass is reached. It may not be long.

Colin Keith, Glasgow

CONGRATULATIONS to Douglas Lowe for his hard-hitting article on Scottish club golf's demographic problems. This is a problem my golfing friends and I have identified for some time now and although some of us receive the benefits of these reductions we realise that these are unsustainable.

Although I don't yet "benefit" from the reduction, I have taken early retirement and

manage over 120 rounds a year at two clubs. Some of the pensioner members manage even more rounds than this at only one club where the annual subscription is less than £300 for the over 65s. This makes the average cost per round less than £2 per round; very cheap golf!

We need to attract a lot more younger members although some I have spoken to feel that rounds of golf take too long and use up a large part of their day which is unfair on their wives and family. Maybe we should have nine-hole competitions.

Ivor Matheson, Dumfries