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Tournaments Follow Trends— It's Your Turn to Set Them

Always a creative variation on old themes, the tournament calendar at your club or course is a lifeblood of the facility—for the present and the future, as well

By John Torsiello

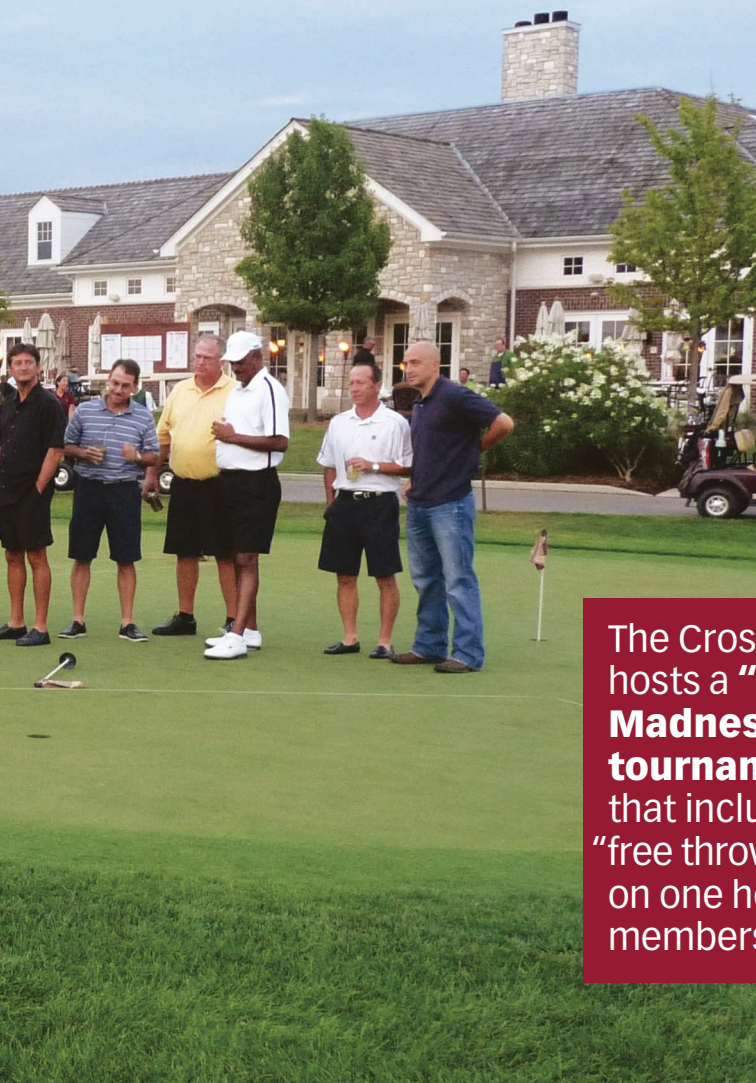
Tournament activity has always brought club members together, displayed the talents of the golf staff, driven revenues from multiple channels and formed an outreach network to prospective new recruits. The difference today is in how much more important those benefits are. So, if you've been wondering why your traditional club tournaments are experiencing declining attendance and lack the buzz they once had in the 19th hole and locker room, it's a worthy question. And all the worthier to think outside the treelines and uncover new and innovative ways to engage the clientele.

It's there in black and white; social demographics have changed dramatically over the last 20 years. Today, for many of your members, it's all about family and not having the dad spend his entire weekend at the club. Two- and three-day tournaments are going the way of the brassie, replaced by one-day events, such as 18- or even nine-hole scrambles, charity tourneys that involve the entire community, Friday

and Saturday afternoon mixers combining golf, a glass of chardonnay, a few beers and chit-chat, and father-son and mother-daughter tournaments, among others.

"Tournaments generally require a substantial time commitment from our members and some may choose not to play in these events because of that reason," says Joe Titus, Head Professional at Hawthorne Woods Country Club in Dartmouth, Mass. "Many of our members have young children and these family obligations and responsibilities encroach upon tournament participation at our club."

Titus realizes he and other PGA professionals are vying for a piece of the family discretionary time pie. "Families are spending much more time with their children in other sporting activities and social outings." However, there's a golden opportunity to provide a social atmosphere for members, children and guests, which can encompass, besides golf, other social activities and dining options. "In recent years, we have succeeded when our social tournaments are run



The Crossings hosts a **"March Madness" tournament** that includes a "free throw" format on one hole that members love.

Plenty of bonding occurs during special side events like this one at Hawthorne Woods Country Club in Dartmouth, Mass.

Springs Resort in Sussex County, N.J., says the resort offers a plethora of incentives to entice the families of members and guests to take part in events at the resort's various golf courses.

"We have attractive pricing per family member, less than \$20 per person. Additionally, our course offers four-seater golf carts, large cup sizes for juniors, a child-friendly menu, and other features that appeal to kids."

Let's face it, it's all about selling the product. Crystal Springs heavily promotes its tournaments through a personalized golf concierge service, which Abate calls "a unique and welcomed feature at Crystal Springs Resort." Additionally,

the Resort promotes tournaments in regularly scheduled e-blasts to "relevant database segments," and in all its pro shops.

Scott Mattiello, PGA General Manager and Head Professional at Green Woods Country Club in Winsted, Conn., says providing bang for the buck also spurs participation in tournaments. He runs a slew of events, such as a nine-hole "Nine and Dine," Scotch foursomes, off-the-cuff scrambles, and couples events that he calls

"win-win," especially on Friday nights when many members are looking for a little stimulation after a week's work. As for value, he says, "Include the cart, range balls, lunch, dinner, tee prizes and put good value in there so that the message is clear to those who didn't take part that they missed out."

Mattiello believes it is, "Our job as PGA professionals to run exciting, well-organized golf tournaments. It's absolutely worth the effort to create the camaraderie or culture necessary for a successful country club operation." And don't forget the much needed financial support derived from pro shop credit as tournament prizes.

Rather than pull in the flagsticks and close down shop when the weather turns cold, Bob Doria, PGA General Manager/ Head Professional at Makefield Highlands Golf Club in Yardley, Pa., is promoting the heck out of his club through year-end tournaments.

An "Oktoberfest Scramble" is conducted at Makefield Highlands the Wednesday prior to Halloween. The four-player scramble event (limited to 30 teams of four players each) sells out annually. The price of \$125/player includes golf, lunch, dinner (German fare) a tee gift and, OK, now you're talking, a two-hour open beer bar with Oktoberfest offerings. A "Black Friday Superintendent's Revenge," with nearly impossible pin placements has a full field of 120 players. The price of \$100 per player includes breakfast, golf, tee gift, dinner and prizes. Players start signing up for both events almost over two months prior, Doria reports. The

as nine-hole events, and with an annual adult/child event that has grown in participation each year."

With modern families' time constraints, Bruce Wilcox, Director of Golf at the 1757 Golf Club in Dulles, Va., has found that most of his members are only able to make time for one-day events, thus he conducts very few multi-day tourneys. Themed tournaments are popular at the 1757 Golf Club, with an Irish Open in March and a Turkey Shootout in November (the latter a staple of courses located in the northern U.S.), both of which sell out every year. These are two- and four-person team events. Since most of Wilcox's regulars are not ultra-competitive players this gives them a chance to have fun with their friends in a somewhat competitive atmosphere.

In keeping with the "fun" aspect of tournaments, Gary Glaser, general manager at The Crossings at Carlsbad, Calif., has created formats that add excitement and interest in events at his club. For example, The Crossings hosts a "March Madness" tournament that includes a "free throw" format on one hole to connect the event to the annual college basketball tournament. He says, "On the free throw hole, golfers can throw the golf ball one time throughout the hole without adding a stroke to their score and our participants love it!"

Michelle Abate, director of marketing at the Crystal



With a Mea Culpa on Overbuilding, Ex-NGF CEO Talks about Courses and Consumers

Recently awarded a Ph.D. from Clemson University's business school, David Hueber is sharing results of his doctoral research and talking about business solutions for public and private golf.

By David Hueber

I served as president and CEO of the National Golf Foundation from 1982 to 1989, when I left the golf administration sector to become president of the Ben Hogan Company. It was during my NGF years that the need for adding “a golf course a day” to America’s existing supply was expressed and much publicized. As one of the people who first studied the demand projections underlying that slogan – in other words, as one of the people who helped create golf’s supply problems – I can assure you the road to our present situation was paved with good intentions.

At the time that the golf-course-a-day concept took root our industry was averaging 125 course openings a year. The game appeared to have an advantage in the wings, due to changing demographics. The massive Baby Boom segment of the population was aging and golf stood to benefit. Our hypothesis was that as Boomers grew older they would have

the time, money and inclination to play golf.

Keep in mind that golf was deep in the doldrums during the early 1980s. Many people considered it a dying industry. That was inaccurate. Golf was actually an industry at the threshold of a positive growth cycle – what would turn out to be its third boom period of the 20th century.

Within the NGF we were surprised at how decidedly the golf-course-a-day slogan stuck, but many in the media give it much more credit than it deserves for causing such increase in the number of golf courses through the 1990s. There was indeed an attitude shift going on – one that was long overdue. To my great satisfaction, there was a dramatic improvement in the golf industry’s perception of itself. It was a plain fact that golf at that time did need to upgrade

David Hueber (inset) and colleagues meet at one of the early Golf Summits organized by the National Golf Foundation.



Planning for growth back in 1992: With the likes of Jim Awtrey (then the PGA's chief executive) on the dais, industry veteran Tom Stine offers commentary.

and expand the product being offered to U.S. golfers. However, what we ended up doing was excessive and unwise. Along the way, many investors, course owners and golf managers have suffered losses. Courses are now closing at a faster rate than they're opening, so the pendulum has swung the other way. That whittles away at least somewhat at the supply-demand mismatch.

What I would say now about the concepts and theories being expounded in the 1980s was that the number of courses – 365 on an annual basis – was just part of the story. That quantity was too much, undeniably. And yet the issue of quality and type is also highly relevant. These days the industry speaks justifiably about “welcome center” golf facilities – in the building boom of the 1980s and '90s golf developers basically built “rejection center” facilities. What golfers encountered when they arrived at these courses was visually impressive and good for bragging rights, but it wasn't built to last.

We made the mistake of building too many courses in the wrong places. We spent too much money building them. We made the courses too expensive to maintain. We made them too difficult to play, under the guise of selling real estate lots and under the perception that golf equipment technology was enabling players to hit the golf ball farther – therefore the courses had to play much longer. Touring pros were hitting the golf ball farther, but the average golfers could not take advantage of that same technology. The fact is that average golfers are just as average as they ever were. Yet, what we gave them were golf courses that weren't fun to play, took too long to play and were too expensive.

According to the NGF golf course database, more than 40 percent of the golf courses built in the 1990s were tied to master planned communities. The conventional wisdom was that golf courses designed by marquee architects and famous for their difficulty led to higher property values. This

The building boom is over and the industry is dealing with a large number of courses that don't fit – and never did fit – what people really want to play.

real estate development strategy led to the development of longer golf courses, which maximized the number of premium priced golf course frontage lots. Typically, the golf courses' operations were subsidized, because developers were interested primarily in selling real estate.

This real estate strategy also indirectly inspired many developers of public golf courses that did not have a real estate tie-in to redevelop or build more costly, longer and more difficult courses. These course owners wanted to offer a “country club for a day” golf experience that was competitive with the real estate developers' golf course product.

Since 1986, the NGF has conducted a large-scale survey of 20,000 Americans regarding golf participation via samples drawn from a Synovate Inc. panel comprised of over two million people. Findings from this annual study repeatedly confirm that the top three barriers to golf participation are that it's too expensive to play golf, the golf courses are too difficult and it takes too long to play a round of golf.

The gist of my research is that the golf courses built or renovated during the 1990s were more costly, more difficult and guaranteed to take longer to play than the golf courses built during the 1920s and 1960s development boom periods in the 20th century. Consequently, the golf industry has inherited a large number of golf courses that are unsustainable, and this may have contributed to the decline in golf participation and rounds played. This also suggests that we may be offering a golf course product that our customers don't want to buy.

Yes, there is valuable and useful brainstorming these days about ways of enticing busy Americans to find time for golf – but it's still true that the courses we're luring them to are not the right product. There is much work still to do as we learn and decide what sort of course is best for which market and at what price, but in my view there will have to be great changes to the courses themselves, going forward. ■

Brainstorming 20 years ago: Current PGA CEO Joe Steranka mans the easel for table-mates like former GOLF Magazine chief editor George Peper (far left).

