GOLF DIGEST

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Features

THE GRASS IS GREENER

PRIVATE CLUBS RIDE A WAVE OF NEW MEMBERS

BY TOD LEONARD

Cattail Creek near Baltimore • photographs courtesy of the clubs

From his back yard that overlooks the 16th hole at Timarron Country Club in Southlake, Texas, Jeff Kane sees every day—every hour, for that matter—the stunning impact the coronavirus pandemic has had on golf. From the dawn-patrol foursomes

finishing their rounds before lunch to the late-comers hustling home in the gloaming, there isn't enough light and aren't enough holes to satiate golfers right now.
Simply getting a tee time has become something of a blood sport for Kane and his club cohorts. If you don't snap up a slot on the computer in the first minute, you're stuck hoping for an invite from somebody with faster fingers. "A sword fight," Kane says of the battle.

We've seen it nationwide since COVID-19 took hold in March. Courses are flooded by people who have fewer ways to safely gather and recreate. The shift to working from home— it even has its own acronym, WFH—likely will continue long past COVID as businesses change their practices about offices and travel. Public courses have full tee sheets after going years at less than capacity, and the effect is more striking at private clubs. Though play at public courses in 2020 increased by 9.4 percent through October, rounds at private clubs surged 16.5 percent, according to the National Golf Foundation.
"I don't think anyone could have predicted that this pandemic would be the biggest thing to happen to golf since Tiger Woods showed up," says Ray Cronin, founder of Club Benchmarking, a firm that offers data and analysis to 300 participating golf clubs.

Not all clubs have experienced the boom, of course. Club Benchmarking says 32 percent of its private facilities had fewer members in 2020 than they did in 2019. Some clubs raised dues simply to make up for losses in outside business and food and beverage, and others were able to receive funds from the COVID-19 Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) to keep staff working. The fate of many clubs during the pandemic has been predicated on the work they had previously done to make them attractive to prospective members—course renovations, remodeled clubhouses and new amenities like pickleball and platform tennis.

Dave Taylor, general manager of Bradenton Country Club on Florida's Gulf Coast, realized in late spring that the pandemic wasn't the doomsday scenario for his business he feared. Taylor and his staff were inundated with inquiries about memberships. Bradenton, which works with national-consulting partner Clubhouse Solutions, had 268 golf members before the pandemic, including former Ryder Cup captains Paul Azinger and Tony Jacklin. Late in 2020, the count had swelled to 311, surpassing the club's previous stated ceiling of 300.


Robert Trent Jones Golf Club in Virignia

During an April meeting of Bradenton's board of directors, Taylor proposed that the initiation fee should be raised from $7,500 to $12,500. "They all looked at me like I was crazy," Taylor says. But the board let Taylor run with it, approving what seemed like a daring move, and after prospective members gladly obliged with their checkbooks, the club upped the initiation again in September to $15,000. There was another increase to $20,000 before the end of the year, and Taylor says they're looking at a bump to $25,000 in April.

"Our financial situation is tenfold better than it was a year ago," Taylor says.

Club Benchmarking reports that 34 percent of its facilities experienced a gain in membership from September 2019 to September 2020—many seeing a boost of 10 to 15 percent. The NGF released a study in the fall that found that 64 percent of private clubs say they are in "good" or "great" financial shape. That's up significantly from 46 percent in 2016 and 39 percent in 2009.

"I saw clubs do a great job of pivoting," says Henry Wallmeyer, president and CEO of the National Club Association, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that lobbies the U.S. Congress on behalf of private clubs. Wallmeyer conducted a webinar early in the pandemic to talk strategy with clubs, and 2,000 people joined in when he would normally get a few dozen. "Astounding," he says.

While offering golf, facilities have done more to engage members with drive-up movie nights, online instruction and takeout food services. Some clubs did the grocery shopping for their members. "Even when things get back to normal, I think clubs are most likely to continue some of these services," Wallmeyer says.

Bill Jankowski, general manager of Cattail Creek Country Club near Baltimore, says that despite being closed for more than two months in the spring, the club set sales records in 2020, adding 50 new members. “This is by far the biggest boom in the club business that I’ve ever seen,” Jankowski says. “COVID isn’t going away anytime soon, and I see no reason why this pattern will change. You know golf—once you start playing, you get the bug.”

At Hacienda Golf Club in the Los Angeles suburbs, general manager Russell Sylte says he had to hire a membership director—a job he once did—when inquiries tripled this year. The result was 37 new members. “What’s unknown in private-club membership is how it will change post-COVID, and so that’s why it’s critical now that we capture as many leads as we can,” he says.

Golf-course managers say they are seeing a steady flow of younger members and their families who are looking for a safe and active social environment. At club events, Jankowski happily watches enthusiastic newcomers mix with a mostly welcoming old guard. “We’ve seen a lot more spouses and families coming out [during COVID],” says Jerod Becton, general manager of Lubbock Country Club in Texas, who added a teaching pro to answer the demand for more instruction. “People have nothing else to do. There are no movies or anything. In the past, people didn’t have five hours to come out and play; now they do. This is going to be a big influx for golf.”

The latest club boom follows years of moribund business for many after the Great Recession that began in 2008. At the time of the financial downturn, golf already was experiencing a membership drought because the Baby Boomer generation had aged out of what the club industry considers the prime targets for membership—42 year olds. In the decade before, golf courses paired with housing developments were going up faster than Tiger Woods could lift trophies.

Now, a large portion of Generation Xers are in their 40s, and they have the interest and financial wherewithal to join private clubs. Though the pandemic has motivated many to act, Cronin says the real difference is the demographic underneath. Private-club golf, he’s wagering, will thrive long after COVID-19’s sad grip on our lives is gone.