BY MARK LESLIE

A number of Americans in the golf industry have been traveling to Europe, exporting their knowledge and cashing in on their talent.

Meanwhile, we in the United States can learn one major lesson from the Europeans: Keep the family strong.

Speakers at Golf Course Europe in West Germany last fall spoke about the importance of the family unit in their countries. Families there actually have actually spent leisure time together. Sound like America 30 or 40 years ago?

That family bond not only translates into a better society but — if golf course builders and golf community developers plan correctly — it can mean higher revenues at their facilities.

If a golfing facility can draw an entire family to a course instead of just Dad, or Mom and Dad for that matter, the profits can soar: both for the family and the facility.

Over the years in the United States, all too often golf has pulled families apart.

The term “golf widow” is not an unfounded term.

“Golf orphans” was never coined but could be in many families. It’s Saturday and Dad’s off to the golf course. Eighteen holes equals four to five hours away from wife and kids. Lunch and drinks — count off another hour or two.

When day dawns on Sunday, ditto.

Some simple yet innovative projects around the country will help the situation. Others by their very nature will surely bring many families together.

Example 1: Golf Unlimited’s “Lake Under Hill Golf Center” (see page 1 story) in Orlando, Fla., was formulated on the idea of drawing on the entire family. Owner Jack Irwin said, “Dad can bring the kids out and teach them or let them play mini-golf while he and his wife are playing.”

The center will include a fully lighted par 3 course, complete heated or cooled driving range with landing greens, mini-golf course and a huge green that will serve as an 18-hole putting “course.”

The par 3 layout is short enough so that the whole family can play it together yet challenge the adults. And Irwin plans to offer beginners’ instruction.

Golf Unlimited hopes to build similar facilities elsewhere.

Example 2: In Panama City, Fla., Bay Point Yacht and Country Club expects this year to complete a similar “family golf center,” featuring a 54-hole lighted driving, all-weatherless, a large putting area, two 18-hole miniature golf courses, teaching facilities, golf arcade and snack bar.

Example 3: Jim McLoughlin of The McLoughlin Group in Pleasantville, N.Y., a consultant to golf course developers, is reporting success with this idea: Next the club-house set aside 20 acres for a double-ended driving range surrounded by three holes — a par 3, par 4 and par 5 — that are not part of the 18. Make those holes the best in the facility, McLoughlin suggests, adding that while some members of the family practice off the tee, the others are nearby playing those three extras.

Example 4: Modified distance Cayman ball courses, the brainchild of Jack Nicklaus, equalize good and average golfers and could mean more families playing together. Architect Hill Amick of Daytona Beach, Fla., is a major proponent of the Cayman courses.

Example 5: Pitch-and-putt courses offer wonderful opportunities for parents to take their children out to a learning — and family — environment.

Meanwhile, the burgeoning number of “golf course communities” should strengthen families by the very nature of the communities — residents live where they golf. No more travel time away from family. A better chance to take along the children who, in turn, can play just nine if 18 is too much.

Managers of these communities can organize family events, creating healthy family as well as community marketing. Creative can be a major force for change, treating golf as a social happening for the entire family and tournaments as family outings: father-son, mother-daughter, husband-wife, father-daughter, brothersister; the possibilities are lengthy.

Shifts in societal makeup, such as the aging of the population, make golf a game that can easily place grandfather and grandson together in a threesome.

Sir Henry Cotton wanted a string of nine-holes, economically built and maintained, so that young golfers could learn the rudiments of the game and the etiquette of the game. All hail that idea!

The National Golf Foundation for four years has declared a Family Golf Week in the summer to encourage golfers to share the experience with family members. Good going. I’ll never forget the “sign-off” of a sports show I watched while growing up.

Maine outdoorsman Bud Leavitt would end each show with this refrain: “The family that plays together, prays together, stays together.”

Truer words were never spoken.

Golf COURSE News

Happy New Year. Our first-ever January issue begins the year with a very healthy list of readers and advertisers.

A number of Americans in the golf industry have been traveling to Europe, exporting their knowledge and cashing in on their talent.

Meanwhile, we in the United States can learn one major lesson from the Europeans: Keep the family strong.

Speakers at Golf Course Europe in West Germany last fall spoke about the importance of the family unit in their countries. Families there actually have actually spent leisure time together. Sound like America 30 or 40 years ago?

That family bond not only translates into a better society but — if golf course builders and golf community developers plan correctly — it can mean higher revenues at their facilities.

If a golfing facility can draw an entire family to a course instead of just Dad, or Mom and Dad for that matter, the profits can soar: both for the family and the facility.

Over the years in the United States, all too often golf has pulled families apart.

The term “golf widow” is not an unfounded term.

“Golf orphans” was never coined but could be in many families. It's Saturday and Dad's off to the golf course. Eighteen holes equals four to five hours away from wife and kids. Lunch and drinks — count off another hour or two.

When day dawns on Sunday, ditto.

Some simple yet innovative projects around the country will help the situation. Others by their very nature will surely bring many families together.

Example 1: Golf Unlimited's "Lake Under Hill Golf Center" (see page 1 story) in Orlando, Fla., was formulated on the idea of drawing on the entire family. Owner Jack Irwin said, "Dad can bring the kids out and teach them or let them play mini-golf while he and his wife are playing."

The center will include a fully lighted par 3 course, complete heated or cooled driving range with landing greens, mini-golf course and a huge green that will serve as an 18-hole putting "course."

The par 3 layout is short enough so that the whole family can play it together yet challenge the adults. And Irwin plans to offer beginners' instruction.

Golf Unlimited hopes to build similar facilities elsewhere.

Example 2: In Panama City, Fla., Bay Point Yacht and Country Club expects this year to complete a similar "family golf center," featuring a 54-hole lighted driving, all-weatherless, a large putting area, two 18-hole miniature golf courses, teaching facilities, golf arcade and snack bar.

Example 3: Jim McLoughlin of The McLoughlin Group in Pleasantville, N.Y., a consultant to golf course developers, is reporting success with this idea: Next the clubhouse set aside 20 acres for a double-ended driving range surrounded by three holes — a par 3, par 4 and par 5 — that are not part of the 18. Make those holes the best in the facility, McLoughlin suggests, adding that while some members of the family practice off the tee, the others are nearby playing those three extras.

Example 4: Modified distance Cayman ball courses, the brainchild of Jack Nicklaus, equalize good and average golfers and could mean more families playing together. Architect Hill Amick of Daytona Beach, Fla., is a major proponent of the Cayman courses.

Example 5: Pitch-and-putt courses offer wonderful opportunities for parents to take their children out to a learning — and family — environment.

Meanwhile, the burgeoning number of "golf course communities" should strengthen families by the very nature of the communities — residents live where they golf. No more travel time away from family. A better chance to take along the children who, in turn, can play just nine if 18 is too much.

Managers of these communities can organize family events, creating healthy family as well as community marketing. Creative can be a major force for change, treating golf as a social happening for the entire family and tournaments as family outings: father-son, mother-daughter, husband-wife, father-daughter, brother-sister; the possibilities are lengthy.

Shifts in societal makeup, such as the aging of the population, make golf a game that can easily place grandfather and grandson together in a threesome.

Sir Henry Cotton wanted a string of nine-holes, economically built and maintained, so that young golfers could learn the rudiments of the game and the etiquette of the game. All hail that idea!

The National Golf Foundation for four years has declared a Family Golf Week in the summer to encourage golfers to share the experience with family members. Good going. I'll never forget the "sign-off" of a sports show I watched while growing up.

Maine outdoorsman Bud Leavitt would end each show with this refrain: "The family that plays together, prays together, stays together."

Truer words were never spoken.