

# PAY AS MUCH AS YOU PLAY

John Gerring has proven that an idea can sell. Holly Tree CC was only that in the spring of this year—it had no golf course, no swimming pool, no tennis courts and no members. Yet within one 48-hour period, Gerring and his partners convinced enough people of the soundness of the Holly Tree concept that \$1.2 million was invested in residential lots around the course, then under construction. Fifty-seven of the 76 lots put on the market were gobbled up by Greenville golfers.

What could cause this kind of enthusiasm when many country clubs today are losing members? The primary reason given by many of the prospective Holly Tree members was their faith in the kind of golf operation that John Gerring could provide. Potential members mentioned also the low cost. Another reason given was the assurance that Holly Tree would be invitational and the fact that George Cobb would design the course.

Gerring's high reputation with Greenville golfers was won through two separate tours, starting in 1963 as head professional of the exclusive Green Valley CC in Greenville. A professional since 1958, after graduating from Wake Forest College, Gerring went from Green Valley to Myers Park CC in Charlotte, to Deerwood CC in Jacksonville and to Norwood Hills CC in St. Louis, then back to Greenville.

During those years Gerring learned how first-class clubs operate and what ingredients make them successful. These lessons he will apply to Holly Tree.

One of those is that the club will be owned not by the members but by Holly Tree Plantation Corp. The four principal figures in the creation of Holly Tree are Gerring; Dr. James McNamara, a Greenville physician; Jack Shaw, a builder and architect Cobb.

The concept of Holly Tree CC attracted members through a unique pricing plan based on usage

by DAN FOSTER

SPORTS EDITOR  
GREENVILLE NEWS, GREENVILLE, S.C.



"The ultra-rich member is not . . . the best revenue producing member."



". . . couples in their 30s and 40s . . . will use these facilities the most."



"I would like to try having committee men serve three years."

Gerring is a general partner in the corporation along with McNamara and Shaw. He also is general manager of Holly Tree "and golf professional," emphasizing the latter role, "because I want to stay in the golf end. Golf is my business."

### TAKING OFF

The group did not conceive of the idea of Holly Tree until 1972, and only announced their plans on November 6, 1972.

Prices were mentioned in two mailings. The first was sent to people who had been personally recommended by someone known to at least one of the three partners. More names were produced by responses to the first mailing. In all the names of 1,800 heads of families were produced. All had professed an interest in joining Holly Tree or had been recommended by someone who had.

The two most fascinating numbers in those mailings were these: \$100 dues annually for membership and \$20 a month for the use of the golf facilities. Some prospective members looked no further. Those who did found more bargains: tennis fees, \$10 a month and swimming, \$15 a month for five months a year.

"Those who join the club for one activity may use the other facilities on a per use basis," explains Gerring. "An example would be \$1 per outing for swimming and \$2 a day for tennis. Golf would be \$3 on weekdays, \$5 on weekends. For guests, golf fees are \$5 and \$7, respectively.

"Another category of membership is the man who pays \$150 a year and has no other dues. He will be billed each time he uses a facility; those will be the only bills he receives other than his annual \$150."

That particular membership category should appeal especially to people who belong to other clubs, but who still want access to Holly

Tree even though they play most of their golf somewhere else.

One membership category, which might wind up being called "super membership," will cost \$1,000 a year. Gerring's label for it is "charter membership." For that category, the member and every member of his family will get all their range balls free. They will have use of all facilities. It will even cover club storage, locker rental and that member's share of any electric car usage and allow him one free guest each month."

Other membership categories include juniors (ages 21 to 32) and seniors (over 60), each at \$50 annually and \$15 a month for golf; and non-resident memberships at \$25 a year, with activities paid for on a per use basis.

As Gerring sat in his office this spring discussing his plans, the first formal invitation for membership had not yet been extended. Nonetheless, he had a file of projected figures, months in the preparation, which he describes as conservative.

"Based on those," Gerring says, "we expect three-fourths of our course budget to come in through renewals."

That will make each May 1 a very

large day for Holly Tree, particularly as those \$1,000 checks from charter members arrive in the mail.

It will be some time, Gerring discloses, before the club knows how many members it will permit. He is determined to keep the size of the membership comfortable so that the club will not be crowded to the point of jeopardizing the pleasure of those who use it.

#### QUALITY AT LOW COST

From its inception, Gerring wanted a "27 hole membership" and a 27 hole course. "I have made some studies," says Gerring, "and found out that you're so close to taking care of the same amount of play on 27 holes as you do with 36, that 27 seems to be what we should have. On 27 we can give good service, have a super golf course and a quality staff at inexpensive rates." The third nine holes are included in the original land plans, and they will find a place reserved for them when the times comes for them to be built, with very little addition to the maintenance staff, adds Gerring.

Gerring is certain that even at the club's low prices, his club can "be a class operation," and he is deter-

mined that it will.

"We'll have a guardhouse at the gate and there will be a guard in it," he emphasizes. "Members will be issued stickers for their cars. We will have starting times for Saturdays, Sundays and Wednesdays. We are going to install a telephone from the ninth and 18th tees to the clubhouse grill, so players can order their food while they are playing those holes.

"We will designate a special table for quick service for those making the turn. We'll serve breakfast on Saturdays, on Sundays and on holidays."

Gerring believes food should be served only during daylight hours, based on his belief that most country club dining rooms lose money. Holly Tree, therefore, will not serve at night. Besides, as he points out, "There are so many fine restaurants in Greenville, we don't want to ask our membership to subsidize a dining room. If the members want to rent the club for special occasions, they can arrange for their own caterers and pay only a nominal fee for its use."

#### REVENUE THROUGH USAGE

Gerring, whose previous responsi-

*continued*

The indefatigable Gerring discusses the nine and 18 double greens with one of his new assistant professionals.



## PLAY *continued*

bilities have included management, has given a lot of thought to which aspects of a club are assets to the member and which are liabilities, and he has fashioned his master plan for Holly Tree accordingly.

The availability of caddies will be one Holly Tree feature, which Gerring plans to encourage by prohibiting the use of pull carts until 3 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays and possibly Wednesdays when the youngsters are not in school. (Electric cars, of course, will be available.) Gerring plans to combine a golf training program with his caddie program, limiting the caddie roster to those who are sons of members or residents of Holly Tree Plantation even if they aren't members.

"I believe our members will like the caddie program. It will give their sons a chance to earn money, while they are learning about golf," he adds.

Gerring holds definite ideas about member policy making. At Holly Tree, "members will participate in the running of the club and in setting policies. That is unusual for a corporate club." Gerring has expanded that idea to avoid the confusion that often can result when committee members serve only one year. "I would like to try having committee men serve three years," he says.

Gerring's home is only 60 miles from Greenville in Union, and his exposure to the ways of South Carolina golf and golfers includes growing up as the son of golf professional Al Gerring. He has seen enough to make him cautious about idle dreaming, but also enough to help him think big.

The package for Holly Tree that he is designing will allow him to realize several of his ambitions. He has for years wanted to take what he describes as a "quality golf program" to the age and income group he visualizes as Holly Tree's membership. And he is convinced that his program can be achieved without sacrificing pro shop sales.

"The people in the income levels and age groups who will be attracted to Holly Tree are the backbone of the game today. They have fine automobiles, fine houses, good

careers and they want the best in golf equipment and conditions." These are the people, comprising a large market, who have sizeable recreation budgets and who could make up a good club membership, but who are not anxious to lay out \$3,000 or more at one time for a club membership. These people are investing in communities, not just in Holly Tree Plantation, but in other areas of the United States, in which the focal point is the golf course.

Another advantage of Gerring's approach to Holly Tree is his emphasis on a prodigious membership, which increases member enthusiasm in tournament play. The more participants for these events, the more, he believes, the members enjoy competing.

"The ultra-rich member is not, it may surprise you, the best revenue producing member for a golf club. He has so many other things he can afford to do—travel to Europe, extended vacations—that he does not spend as much time playing at his home course as the younger people with less money.

"Mr. Skinner's philosophy was revenue through usage, and our information and experience indicates that couples in their 30s and 40s are the ones who will use these facilities the most."

Equipment purchases in Gerring's shop can be made on the installment plan in cases where the price of the purchase would suggest it. But, he interjects, he has done that at other, more expensive clubs.

"We will let a man buy a \$300 set of clubs and sign 10 \$30 tickets. Each month, one of these \$30 tickets will be added to his bill. I might add that I have never yet lost a cent in one of those deals," he relates.

### MERCHANDISING TO SERVE THE MEMBER

Turning to the subject of service to members through sales, Gerring will retain many merchandising ideas that have served him well at other courses.

"We will mail information regularly to our members. They like to hear from their pro shop," he says. One holdover from the past, which has been particularly effective, and which Gerring will ob-

viously retain, is his habit of mailing thank-you notes to those members whose purchases totaled more than \$15. The appreciation that this personal touch has created is summed up by one of Gerring's admirers: "I bought a car for \$7,000 and didn't get a thank-you note, so it was nice to get one for buying a few golf gloves."

Another successful practice of long-standing that will be incorporated into Gerring's pro shop merchandising plan is the giving of baker's dozen golf balls when a member buys a dozen balls.

Although Gerring dislikes the salesman image, he realizes the necessity of making his merchandise attractive. "I like to take the role of counselor rather than seller," he maintains. "I make suggestions when I'm asked, but I try to let my assistants actually finish the sales when it's not inconvenient."

Although he avoids the discount role, he keeps an eye out "for anything that stays in the shop over three months. Everything seems to depreciate after three months, and I've always believed that one's first loss will be the smallest, so we put things on sale that haven't moved well."

The prestige and integrity of the pro shop, Gerring has long believed, is essential to creating that first-class quality he believes he can achieve. That integrity is compromised, he maintains, when it carries non-golfing items, such as watches or clock radios, solely for profit. Gerring has made a practice of operating attractive and well-stocked pro shops that serve only the golfer and his needs.

The way Gerring expresses it, the soundest business practices are those that best serve the member and his game.

One of his most successful, involved promotions was his "Swing and Slim" exercise golf lesson classes for women. (This particular service was cited by *GOLFDOM* as one of the 10 best ideas submitted for its "Buy It At the Pro Shop" contest October/November issue, p. 34A.) He retained an instructor to conduct the class in light exercises. After a hour on the exercises, "we worked on their golf swings. We

*continued on page 51*

charged a \$10 registration fee, but with the condition that anyone attending all sessions would get a \$5 credit at the pro shop and we gave back the other money in prizes.

"It helped their golf games, their physical well being and it encouraged them to play more golf, because they were enjoying it more."

A good youth program also is included in Gerring's plans to serve his members. He is aware that multiple benefits can result from cultivating youthful interest in golf. Not only, he says, are the children where their parents want them to be, but, he adds, "A lot of adults start playing because their children do."

Teaching, also, ranks high on Gerring's list of services to his members, and because he has had rewarding results as a teacher, he intends to spend a lot of his time at Holly Tree teaching.

"I've never seen," he says with a smile, "a professional who was a good and enthusiastic teacher, lose his job."

"I still believe in the old time values—courtesy, appreciation, interest in your members and their families."

Members undoubtedly will applaud the plan to keep the course open seven days a week from March through October. Gerring simply does not think a course must be closed one day a week for maintenance. In the other months, November through February, he feels six days will be plenty to satisfy playing appetites.

Members will find more than golf at their club. The clubhouse will house a sauna bath and an executive suite. The latter will be equipped with a desk, telephone, note pads and other administrative accoutrements as an added convenience for those members who need to conduct one more office chore before they reach the tee.

There also will be a card room and a golf museum, stocked initially by a large number of items that people have given Gerring over the years, "including about 180 hickory-shafted clubs."

The site of Holly Tree is eight miles outside Greenville. There are good access roads, and Shaw's hous-

ing development was well under way before the idea of the club was even a consideration. Dr. McNamara already owned some of the land which will feel the spikes of play at Holly Tree. Part of it is on his former cattle farm. The group extended the corporation's land holdings to 935 acres before they made their initial announcement.

An Atlanta firm already has bought 35 acres to build condominiums, a feature the partners feel will add graciousness to their project.

The first 18 holes, for which ground was broken almost during the initial press conference, rolls over 175 acres, and the land reserved for the third nine does not have long to wait, it seems.

Gerring, who normally has 24 hour, seven day, 12 month enthusiasm, verbally caresses his new undertaking. He talks of bentgrass greens, the flexible tees the way some men talk about their horses.

As count-down to opening day began in earnest, his thoughts jumped so far ahead that he began checking off the people to whom he felt a great debt for helping bring Holly Tree to reality.

"Jack Shaw and Dr. McNamara, of course. And a man who has been tremendously helpful, George Cobb. He has done a super job of giving me the benefit of things he has learned in constructing over 300 other golf courses.

"Bill Ullman, of Southern Golf Course Builders has been a great help."

Those were immediate and belong to the present. His conversation then turned to his pro shop philosophy, which he has acquired working for Wade Ruffner at Biltmore Forrest CC, Biltmore, N.C., E.E. Johnson, Belle Meade CC, Nashville, Tenn., and Harold Sargent of Atlanta's East Lake CC.

Those were the head professionals under whom he served his official apprenticeship, after having served an unofficial apprenticeship under his father.

All of them have contributed to Gerring's picture of the type of golf operation he would like to run. Many professionals have had the same dream. What make Gerring's different is that his is coming alive. □



### HIGH DENSITY PLASTIC WEATHER-PROOFED



The bright, yellow-handled RAKE-Ezee Rake flags attention, reminds golfers to rake trap. Stands erect on blunt metal point.

Sturdy, attractive, won't rust, yet low in cost. RAKE-Ezee stands erect on point, reminds golfer to rake trap. Fully guaranteed with tough plastic head. See your distributor, or write: >

MFD. BY  
NORTH CENTRAL  
*Plastics* INCORPORATED  
ELLENDALE, MINN.

For more information circle number 166 on card

## MONTEX GOLF CAR

One of the best fleet golf cars on the market today is now available to golf car dealers and golf course owners throughout the country.

Starting from zero in 1971, in Florida, we almost matched our competition the first year and out-sold all the golf car companies in our territory by better than 2 to 1 in 1972 (list of sales available by written request).

Montex Golf Car production has increased enough so now you can have this golf car on your golf course. Join the winner. Call (305-395-4414) or write for further information.

**Lew Montgomery, Inc.**  
145 N. W. 20th Street  
Boca Raton, Florida 33432

For more information circle number 157 on card