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HERB GRAFFIS

SWINGING AROUND GOLF

IMPROVED CLUB MANAGEMENT A MUST

Improvements in management by both elected officials and department heads is essential if private golf clubs are going to meet the continued, dangerous increases in operating costs and taxes.

Higher costs of labor and materials, inefficient labor, murderous taxation and, too often, operating policies not in line with prevailing conditions have increased the price of memberships beyond the reach of many highly desirable families.

These potential members and many present members haven't had their incomes raised at the same rate as the cost of living.

There is no prospect for a brighter-looking tax picture either. Golf clubs have never sold to their respective communities their values as bargains on the tax rolls. They don't send kids to school, need streets and lighting, expensive sewerage and garbage collection or water supply. They rarely need the police, then only for shop robberies and vandalism, and it must be said that policing these areas has been no bargain for most golf clubs.

That a golf club raises the value and tax revenue of all the surrounding property hasn't carried weight with local taxing bodies.

Collectively, private golf clubs haven't done much of a job of legislative self defense. Lately, the National Club Assn. has done some mild lobbying, but it still is clear that the private golf club must help itself to salvation.

The first priority for improving management is to gather facts about current club membership.

Although it's easy to do, few clubs have made what officials in

their own businesses would call a market survey.

Club officials change often and usually have only their own feelings and sketchy observations about the membership market. At annual meetings, a minority of members attend. Of these, expressions of approval or criticism of operations or plans rarely are based on adequate data and analysis.

The result is that elected club officials continue to direct operations for another year on the platform of custom and personality. These officials are self-sacrificing, competent and conscientious.

"Can you tell me why men who do so well running their own businesses can't run a golf club?" is a question often asked when assessment notices are received by members.

The querulous members, of course, can't subject themselves to the inconvenience and criticism of being club officials.

The answer to their question is easy: The officials don't know as much about the club and its members as they know about their own businesses.

The necessary corrective education has to come from questionnaires in a market survey. Private club officials, whether or not they recognize the fact, generally are representative of the more articulate and powerful members of the membership. That's not their fault, it's the responsibility. There should be no second-class citizens in a first-class club.

David McNiven, a banker and a director of the Cypress Lake CC at Fort Myers, Fla., observed that the lack of definite facts was preventing the club directors from confidently making sound and

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foresighted decisions.

The Cypress Lake situation is similar to that of other private country clubs. The club is the first private club in an area that is developing swiftly, both commercially and in population. It's 12 years old. It's on ground donated by real estate promoters. It was Nothingsville, populated by alligators, turtles, cranes and other wild birds. It was badly drained, underlain by limestone that made construction so difficult and expensive that the plans of architect Dick Wilson never were carried out.

Since the club was installed in the growing city halfway between Tampa and Miami on Florida's southwest coast, it has become the nucleus of a multi-million dollar residential development.

Prior to the McNiven survey, Cypress Lake officials were reaching in the dark. That's the case at too many clubs. Even the oldest clubs need to take a fresh look at themselves with market surveys.

Age seems to be the first question considered in most helpful surveys. Members of the family, number of rounds played, meals at the club, guests and other significant questions need to be answered before the directors know what they should be doing about managing the club. Much of the detailed information could be supplied by the manager's records and pro shop information.

Without such information, how can club officials direct the policies and operations of the club? McNiven says, "You've got to look very carefully before you leap with the club member's money."

With what private country club memberships cost, golf and other programs had better give their members value.

The necessity of the club market surveys as a basic guide for club officials probably is pin-pointed when one reads the forecasts that golf club operating costs will be least 8 per cent higher next year. That means management must be at least 8 per cent better or the club loses ground.

And from where we look, the one place where there is no inflation is in information. □

Did it ever strike you as funny that there should be debates about who is the world's best golfer but none about who is the nation's best golf course superintendent?

Are there so many golf course superintendents who are so very good, or what?

I used to hear professionals complaining about courses in the PGA championships. This year at Canterbury and last year at Oakland Hills, I heard touring pros say that they've never played on courses in better condition than the one Ted Woehrle had at Oakland Hills and Bill Narker had at Canterbury. Many times have I heard that the PGA was doomed to be a second-rate championship, because it was played in July or August, when even the good Lord couldn't keep a course in first-class condition. *Poa annua* was going, greens, fairways and tees were burning out or being ruined by fungi, insects and acts of God.

It seems that the PGA didn't have much of a chance to get a course in championship condition at the time its championships were played. The situation was uncertain, and the superintendent who heard that his club had accepted a PGA championship was expected to take to drink or cut his wrists.

I think the change came at the PGA championship at Dallas AC course in the fiery summer of 1963. The course was in marvelous playing condition. Temperature was around 100; humidity was high. Nicklaus, the winner, also won the driving contest with his longest shot being, by my fallible memory, around 340 yards. The championship was lost on the par-three holes.

I remarked to the host professional, Graham Ross, "It must kill a superintendent to play a major championship in this weather." Ross replied, "Not our man. He is the greatest." M.H. Veal Jr. was the superintendent. I think it was his father who was in charge of the Southern Hills CC course at Tulsa when the 1958 National Open was played on turf in excellent condition despite blazing heat. Tommy Bolt won with a comfortable margin by staying out of the bermuda rough. □

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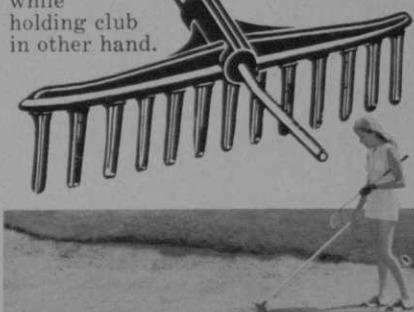
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