

## WINTER PLANS

# KEEPING MEMBER INTEREST HIGH

Golf and country clubs increasingly serve as the central source of their members' sporting and social lives. This means clubs must expand existing facilities or build new ones to meet these additional demands. Clubs that are successful are so because they have been able to span a variety of member interests and offer something for everyone. This holds true whether the club is blessed with balmy, tropical climate or is snowed in six months of the year.

But perhaps the seasonal club has a more difficult time sustaining member interest over those deep months of winter. At least at warm-weather clubs, members can use the golf course. But at some seasonal clubs, even moderately active members can lose interest in the club; less active members might drop out all altogether.

The effect of waning member loyalty on club income can be disastrous. All club activities grind down, from dining room to pro shop. Staffs and crews are thinned out and the prospect of trying to find and hire for next season reliable, experienced replacements can be a problem to supervisory personnel.

The Denver Country Club has minimized these problems by countering with an active winter program of which substantial part involves indoor tennis and ice skating with attendant activities — teaching programs, special parties — skirting the periphery.

Denver is a typical for a western club (when one thinks of these kind of clubs, vast acreages, expansive fairways and sprawling, modern buildings come to mind. Built on its present site in 1906, it is the only

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inner-city club in Denver with a golf course. The grounds are hemmed in by arterial streets, residential areas and a large shopping center. Several greens and tees border backyard fences, although they are shielded by trees and shrubs.

The course is narrow and of moderate length, and although most greens have been rebuilt, a few are old and small. These disadvantages are not strong enough to offset the pull of tradition, accessibility and a superb tree-lined course. Even the lure of big money cannot break the thread of loyalty. Extravagant offers have been made for the property, and each in turn have been rejected by members.

The 750 resident family members are leaders in Colorado business, finance and society. Administration works through a board plus committees, an executive (financial) manager and a clubhouse manager.

The manager of outdoor operations is Lou Haines, who in 1968 succeeded his father, the late Jim Haines, a veteran of 41 years as superintendent. Haines, a national director of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, is a graduate of Colorado State University, with a major in horticulture and basically a golf course superintendent who has expanded responsibilities. In his position, he oversees budgets that approach a quarter of a million dollars in the following areas:

- golf course and grounds maintenance operations
- swimming pool operations

- skating rink operations
- tennis court operations (now 12 courts — two indoors).

It all adds up to considerable responsibilities for one young 32-year-old, but Haines handles it with aplomb, minimizing the administrative problems by relying on several experienced assistants for the maintenance, plus the managers of each program.

"Each man is assigned his area of responsibility," Haines told GOLFDOM. "Our permanent people know what to do, I don't have to check on them, only minimally. My biggest problem will be replacing our old hands when they retire.

"We want good people and try to keep those we have," he said. "I have pushed hard for salary increases so we can attract the best. But they stay here mostly because they like their jobs."

Starting this season, the maintenance people also had new headquarters. Haines and staff moved into two, 4,800-square-foot buildings near the back of the course. The cost was about \$90,000.

Haines currently has four men on the staff, whose years at Denver Country Club total 86. Rudy Alden, retired head of maintenance for tennis, the swimming pool and skating rink, is still active on a part-time, as-needed basis after 42 years of service. Assistant course superintendent Stan Smith is a neophyte by comparison with 18 years at the course.

Haines' maintenance staff increases to about 22 in the summer, 12 to 13 permanent and 9 to 10 seasonal. The 22 includes 18 for the golf course, two for clubhouse grounds, one for swimming pool maintenance and one for tree care.

## KEEPING MEMBER INTEREST HIGH continued

Some switch to other jobs in the winter.

"Keeping a substantial year-round staff is a marked advantage for the entire operation," Haines said. "With a minority of seasonal personnel, we have few training or orientation problems.

"Knowledge of procedure over season-to-season means a smoother operation. It shows up in detail work. That makes the difference between a really good golf course and an ordinary one," he said. "A permanent crew has more loyalty and takes pride in its work.

"Many clubs make a mistake in not keeping a larger permanent crew. Most of a budget goes for labor. Much of that can be wasted in training new people each year and repeating previous mistakes. A club can gain back that extra winter labor expense through increased efficiency," he said.

The winter programs at Denver provide reason enough for keeping a large, year-round crew. Also, many jobs can be accomplished by the grounds staff that would otherwise have to be contracted out.

Like many clubs around the country, Denver has been hit with the tennis boom. To meet the mushrooming demand, facilities were expanded to eight outdoor courts. Then, in 1968, they were expanded again to include an indoor tennis house that sheltered two Laykold surface courts. Cost for the structure ran \$100,000-plus. Recently, two more outdoor courts were added, elevated above a new electric cart storage area.

Haines said the indoor courts now are the club's most used facility during the winter months. Because the courts are used so much, and their use is still growing, a tennis professional was retained to give lessons and organize winter tournaments. A combination of more players, snowballing interest in indoor tennis and recent severe winters has rocketed tennis house income 40 percent over projections, reaching near-maximum capacity. Members pay extra for the tennis house, \$4 an hour per court during the winter months.

Haines said indoor tennis re-

mains popular into the summer, especially on rainy days. But even on hot summer afternoons, indoor play goes on, often filling up the 8 a.m. through 10 p.m. schedule every day for lessons. The operating budget for tennis is arrived at after deducting fee income. This includes maintenance wages plus the tennis house utilities, repairs and tennis professional.

The club's winter ice skating program is unique among Rocky Mountain clubs. An 85-foot by 185-foot rink was built in 1953 between the clubhouse and the first hole. Mechanical equipment is housed in a section of the adjacent maintenance shop building. Almost \$100,000 was spent replacing the slab and 11 miles of ice-making pipes in 18 by 1968. It is an outdoor rink, shaded from the bright Colorado sun by hanging sheets of canvas-like material, called Osnaburg. Haines said that the shading material is effective, but causes a great deal of maintenance problems.

"Every time we get a strong wind it takes 15 to 25 man-hours to repair displaced and ripped shading," he said. "Ice planing and maintenance takes another 10 to 15 hours a week. Then, every time it snows, we have to remove that from the ice — it sure doesn't melt."

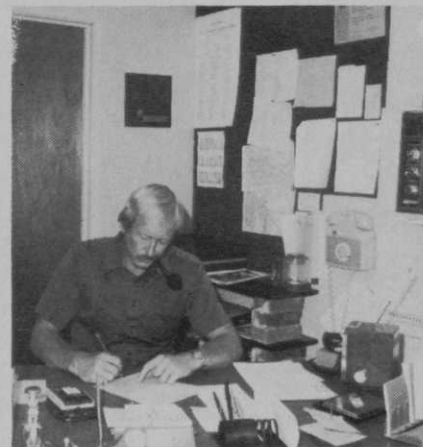
About 75 percent of the annual ice rink facility budget goes out in labor costs. That includes maintenance and staffing of the skate house, where members often hold parties and eat and dance. The ice skating season usually spans November 15 to March 15; hours are 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. weekends, 3 p.m. to 10 p.m. on weekdays. A strong youth hockey schedule, including league competition among five teams, reserves 13 hours a week.

A teaching professional is on duty each season for lessons and to organize special events. These include the annual children's show in February. Haines admits that fewer adults, and more children are skating. Families pay an extra seasonal fee of \$25 to take part in the ice program.

A new important winter program for Haines' crew is tree planting. Started in 1972, a major

replacement and transplanting program was needed for two reasons; on a course two-thirds of a century old, many trees will soon reach the end of their life span; and Dutch elm disease is threatening to take its toll on some of the course's 100-plus American elms. Through tree program dollars and an intensified control program, Dutch elm disease losses have been held to one percent a year.

In cooperation with a commer-



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cial arborist, Haines checked out the number of trees that were either susceptible to disease or have a probable remaining life of less than 20 years. Haines then got board approval of over \$100,000 for a multi-year tree program. He detailed his own planting plan. The first winter alone, 175 new trees, in the four- to six-inch caliper category were planted by the club's crew. Some larger transplants had up to 84-inch balls. Some are new; some are transplants from the back of the course. New species have included cottonwood, green ash, American linden, Siberian elm, Colorado spruce and various species of pine.

Despite its vintage and its image as an "old line" club, Denver Country Club is young in activities and fresh in ideas. These two qualities will keep it healthy while Denver and our society try to adjust to change. □