

Congressional Country Club: An image of serious business

Private country clubs may become a less important factor in this industry as time goes on. Strong clubs will continue, weak ones will pass into obscurity or be brought up by municipalities or independent owners.

It's doubtful Congressional Country Club will ever have to worry about the whirling industry golf has become in the last few years.

Situated outside Washington, D.C., in suburban Bethesda, Md., Congressional was founded in 1921 when a man named Herbert Hoover became its first club president. The doors didn't really open till 1924, when Mr. Hoover and the club threw an inaugural bash and 7,000 people showed up.

Like the times, though, the fortunes of clubs then were a lot shakier than they are today. Congressional held on until 1940 and was reorganized into the family type operation it is today.

Politicians and bureaucrats still hang out there, but they are less obvious and certainly don't stick out in the total membership of 2,200. Washington businessmen, lawyers, lobbyists and even some senators and representatives fill the roster at CCC.

Certainly, more people will notice the club this month, as the touring pros visit the 7,000 yards plus championship course for this year's PGA tournament. But it won't effect the way Congressional has been run for years. The course has top management in club manager Kim Saal, superintendent Warren Bidwell and club professional Bob Benning.

Even though, private clubs are not in the business to make money, Congressional is indeed bottom line conscious. Benning's pro shop generated \$220,000 in gross sales in 1975, while Saal handled more than \$1.3 million in food and beverage the same year. Bidwell handles a maintenance budget well into six figures.

Probably the true focal point for the club, Benning's pro shop handles thousands of rounds a year. The graduate of Purdue Univer-

sity has a staff of four under him including teaching pro Hal Slaton, shop manager Bob Costello, assistant Les Burke and Lynn Hammond, who handles the ladies apparel and bookwork.

"A lot of important people visit this shop, so I have to insist our personnel be sharp, courteous and knowledgeable. These people are used to good service," Benning told GOLF BUSINESS' Nick Romano. "Our keynote is on service. I instill this into the shop people. Pay attention to the customers. Don't ignore them. Indicate to them, they are important people."

Benning has held true to that philosophy throughout his stay at CCC, which started in February, 1973. Between graduating from Purdue and starting with his first assistant pro job at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base's golf course, Benning did a stint in the Marine Corps, then went into the graduate business school at the University of Southern California.

The native of Dayton, Ohio, left his hometown job at Wright-Patterson after only a year and headed for Oakmont Country Club in Glendale, Calif., in 1961. A year later, it was back to the east coast and an assistant position at Mountain Ridge Country Club, West Caldwell, N.J. Benning was there through all of '62 and some of '63, but in the winter of that year went back to California and Thunderbird Country Club in Palm Springs.

Finally, the back and forth trips from coast to coast stopped when Benning landed his first head professional spot at Plainfield (N.J.) Country Club. The job spanned from 1964 to

early 1973, when noted pro Bill Strausbaugh recommended Benning for the Congressional post.

Experience and education have combined to make Benning one of the top merchandisers on the east coast. His shop staff subscribes to the theory that 25 percent of the membership does 75 percent of the business in the shop. "I have to concentrate on good customers. We put heavy emphasis on softgoods. When we merchandise, the most important thing is to display products well," Benning commented.

Smart displays are the rule in the CCC shop. Keeping packages free of dust and always neatly wrapped is essential for added sales, according to Benning. Lynn Hammond is in charge of the women's apparel and her displays underline the merchandising approach the Congressional shop has undertaken.

Women's softgoods are in a separate area of the shop and fitting rooms are available to the ladies. Only two or three blouses or skirts of the same design are kept in stock. Since most of the ladies at the club buy their softgoods in the shop, this alleviates the problem of the same outfits being seen on more than a couple of members.

Benning still has his operation geared on a 40 percent markup and it has proven successful. Shoe sales are a high point of the total sales with more than eight percent of gross sales in this area. In '75, Congressional sold 150 pairs of men's shoes, 75 pair of men's street shoes and a combination of 75 pairs of women's shoes and street shoes.

Street shoes seem to be the way the future of Benning's additional shoes sales may be heading. He regularly confers with manufacturer's representatives to get product information on new lines and then conveys any trends or changes in the market to his assistants.

Cash flow is not a worry for the Congressional shop. According to Benning, all aspects of the golf operation help to give him a good personal income and an optimistic shop picture. In a rough, breakout, 48 percent of his income is generated in the shop, 20 percent on a salary from the club, 10 percent from the golf car operation, 15 from the driving range and seven from lessons. Play will continue to go up, with the addition of nine holes starting with construction following the tournament. Total holes at CCC will then be 36.

Looking out over the future of the industry, Benning is optimistic for the young professionals coming up. "The training is so much better today. The PGA is telling the kids what to expect when they get into the business. It seems the manufacturers are a lot more understanding in their terms as far as the young pros are concerned," the 43-year-old added.

Communication with the membership is another important factor in the Congressional

Several lounges are available for the Congressional membership. Beverage service at the CCC is well respected in the Washington, D.C., area. In 1975, the club grossed \$1.3 million in food and beverage sales.



shop. Benning urges his staff to talk to the membership and attempt to answer any questions they might have about the product.

In essence, Benning tries to carry quality merchandise. For example, he concentrates his equipment purchases among a small number of well-known brands. In the hardgoods area, the CCC shop sold 50 sets of woods and 60 sets of irons in '75.

Golf equipment amounts to 25 percent of shop sales, balls nearly 14 percent and apparel, 30 percent. A successful shop often depends on the visibility of the pro in the club and on the course, "I have an open door policy. I try to get with the members as much as possible. A pro must stay away from the pitfall of playing with just one bunch," Benning noted.

If good public relations is important outside the clubhouse, it's just as important inside with manager Kim Saal. Born and educated in Germany, Saal has been in this country for 13 years, his last two and one half at Congressional. Trained in the intricacies of food-service, in such foreign cities as Paris, London, Engleberg, Switzerland, and Hamburg, Germany; Saal got to America in 1957. For the next five years, he was involved in foodservice at a trio of Washington's finest hotels.

"In 1962, he had an opportunity to get into the club industry and took the position of general manager at Indian Spring Country Club in nearby Silver Spring, Md. He stayed there 11 years. In March of '74, he left there for the Congressional position.

Clubhouse facilities at Congressional are huge. There are 15 regular tennis and three paddle tennis courts, a children's day camp, two outdoor swimming pools along with a pair of kiddie pools, eight bowling lanes, an indoor pool, guest sleeping accommodations, seven permanent residences and dining and party facilities capable of serving up to 1,000.

"This is not a snobbish club. We do have a diverse amount of facilities. Even with the important people that are part of our membership here, this is a friendly club, interested in tradition," Saal told GOLF BUSINESS.

Staff size for Saal is 150 fulltime people that come under his management. Along with the usual array of waiters, cooks, bartenders and service personnel, Saal also oversees maids for the guest rooms, locker room workers and the office staff.

Saal works closely with Benning and Bidwell plus tennis pro Chico Herrick, swimming pro Don Adams and bowling professional Howard Parsons. With foodservice, though, the 48-year-old manager coordinates activities with his assistant food and beverage manager Dusty Anderson, who supervises service and is in charge of making sure menu selections are available and inventory controls are kept in tact.

Congressional has a strict line of command in its foodservice with training supervised under each department head. For example, all

waiters are under the watchful eye of the club's maitre d. Preparation of food is thoroughly checked by head chef Dominic Bartolomeo, who took over those duties a year ago. Saal is very proud of his chef saying, "even when we prepares a sandwich for the men's grill, the kitchen does it in the classical French way."

Bartolomeo's staff is well stocked with talent. Six people are totally involved with the preparation of food. The CCC even has its own full-time pastry chef, an unusual position for a country club.

Meals at the club are well attended with Sunday buffets the most popular. Congressional will hit a high of 17,000 covers each in the high activity months of May, June and September, but even the downtime of January through March averages 11,000 covers a month.

Simply, Saal attempts to manage in a direct manner with a third of his time involved in planning, a third in administration and a third



An attractive sun room available for a number of functions is probably one of Congressional's most active areas.



Club professional Bob Benning is in his third year at CCC. A native of Dayton, Ohio, Benning is one of the most noted merchandisers on the east coast. His shop did more than \$220,000 in 1975.

Design is an important part of the Congressional selling atmosphere. In women's apparel, Benning has turned over the responsibility to Lynn Hammond. A variety of attractive and stimulating coordinative displays always grace the women's area, which is set apart from the rest of the shop.



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in public relations among the staff and membership.

Still, though, the CCC manager thinks food is the way to his member's positive attitude about the club. In the beverage area, Saal has gotten his staff to merchandise wine and has seen the beverage sales in this area skyrocket in the last few months.

"California wines are very popular right now and we encourage the staff to promote the member into buying a bottle of wine with their meal. This has a direct effect on the increased tip the waiter will get," Saal pointed out. Incentives of 50 cents per bottle are awarded captains that sell bottles to members. Mixed drinks, as ever, are popular after meals at the club and Saal's staff of bartenders must be sure to stock on specific brand preference asked by membership.

Again, the emphasis is to give the membership what it wants. Such is the case on the course and the man in charge of it and all the

PGA tournament has its pricetag, too. Preparing for the tourney, CCC has had its crew replacing the sand in all 76 traps and fairways were overseeded with ryegrass. In all, though, there were no major changes made on the design of the course.

By far, grooming is the biggest priority at the course. "We insist the course look neat and has eye appeal," Bidwell noted. Even with a fleet of maintenance vehicles and machinery plus a batch of sophisticated chemicals, Bidwell admits *Poa annua* remains his chief enemy. The Washington's area climate with its high humidity, wetness and fungal diseases don't help matters much. Recent summers with high humidity have found the CCC staff using more fungicide than ever plus watering had to be controlled.

Over 40 years in the business, Bidwell has seen much advancement over the years with research in the field. "Young superintendents today were brought up in this age of advancement. Answers we groped for, are there for them. Keeping up on developments is important. You can't just sit at home. These changes in research are important. Of course, the involvement of the government plays a major part in this today."

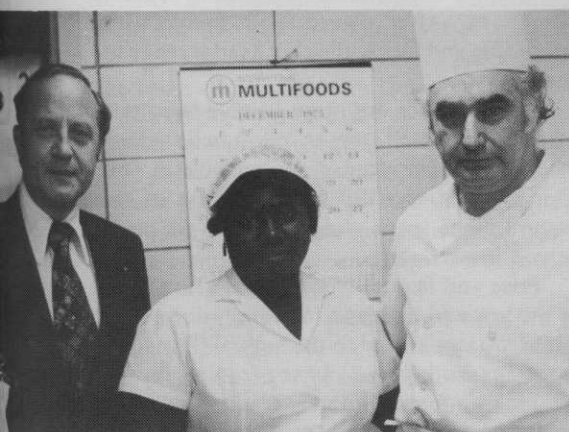
Working with Bidwell to keep up on the advancements in the industry are general superintendent David Burdette, a 15-year vet of CCC; assistant superintendent Vincent Sharkey, graduate of Rhode Island State University; James Bullwinkle, a Cornell grad; James Meier, a University of Georgia grad and Kevin Sutherland, out of Michigan State.

With this talented staff, Bidwell delegates authority and responsibilities. "Foremost is our philosophy a member's ability to play comes over everything. Some architects are designing courses with the touring pros in mind. I think the member has to come first. These are the people that are going to be playing that championship course all but a couple weeks out of a year."

Maybe the easiest question for Bidwell to answer is just why he got into the golf business. Starting out as a caddy in 1928, he became hooked on golf courses. The outdoor work and the challenge of coping with nature daily sold him on the job of superintendent.

Adding to his many years of practical experience, Bidwell attends numerous technical turfgrass conferences offered at Penn State, Purdue, Rutgers and Michigan State. An avid photographer, he has travelled abroad to foreign courses, attempting to see the problems facing superintendents in other countries.

Along with Congressional's board of directors, Saal, Bidwell and Benning are totally involved in a quality operation. Headed up by the efforts of club president Jim Gibbons, Congressional has weathered the financial storms of its early life and has settled down to take its place as one of the top private clubs in the nation. □



Foodservice is the responsibility of club manager Kim Saal and his staff. Saal, left, flanks kitchen employee Janet Spencer, while chef Santo Impellizzero looks on. At center-right, a staff member attends to some chores in the food preparation area.

grounds, Warren Bidwell.

At 62, Bidwell has been in the business of turfgrass management since joining the GCSAA in 1934. He got his first jobs in the Cincinnati area, where he spent 18 years of his career. Next stop was at Seaview Country Club, near Atlantic City, where he worked until August, 1959. Olympia Fields Country Club near Chicago was his next post and Bidwell tackled his first PGA championship tournament there in 1961.

Four years later, Bidwell headed for the Philadelphia Country Club and left there in January, 1972 for the job at Congressional. "We try to give the membership the best technical know-how available," Bidwell insisted. Congressional has 18 people working in its course program and two handling the chores around the grounds, including a substantial investment in maintaining flowers.

Budget for such an operation is large. According to the Ohio native, he spends \$200,000 annually just for fertilizer. Getting another