

Marketing for Membership

Providing the most for the least is the operational concept which Brookridge Country Club, Overland Park, Kan., has pegged its extensive 15-year program of expanding and upgrading service.

The program is achieving its ultimate goal of building a large membership with a varied roster of recreational features at moderate prices and fees. Prices within the means of most middle-management people. The basic premise of the concept is the broader the appeal, the more members you draw, the more services and amenities you are able to supply.

Not the least important of the beneficial spin-offs of the large-membership plan is it enables a club like Brookridge to mold a tight organization of key employees with minimal turnover. At this club, the food-service operation is a sparkling example: High-volume food sales permit staffing a talented chef and other capable food service employees and to pay them enough to keep them in the organization.

The Kansas City-area club has aimed toward this more-for-less-for-many concept with single-minded devotion and notable success since 1960 when Don Tanner, a local developer, and his partner, Wayne Freeland, assumed ownership of the club. At the time, it was a public operation. Tanner and Freeland have built 14 tennis and golf clubs over the country.

Every year, for 15 years, the club has embarked on improvement projects designed to diversify and modernize the facilities. Five years ago, the light started to show brilliantly at the end of the tunnel and the end results started tumbling in.

During the past 10 years, the club has spent a total of \$600,000 on the projects. A decade ago, the members voted for a capital improvement fund for use in remodeling to be accumulated out of dues. The amount is pro-rated by member. As result of the fund, improvement has been achieved without any special assessment.

Currently, the club has 1,500 members and ranks among the best in mid-America for having outstanding facilities at moderate fees (\$56 annually). The golf course is one of the heaviest played in the Greater Kansas City area. If it had to be built today, the 45,000 square feet clubhouse would cost \$2 million.

A countdown on the physical features of the 168-acre development is a study in country club quality and diversity:

- 27 holes of golf with nine built around a residential area dubbed Wycliff containing 450 homes. The main 18-hole course is at Brookridge.

- Four swimming pools. A recent renovation of the pools costing in the neighborhood of \$20,000.

- The spacious clubhouse with its aura of hospitality which is built on two levels with all areas closely related for convenient usage. It features a large food preparation section where all food is prepared from scratch.

- One of the roomiest, best-stocked, best-run pro shops in the area. It is operated by Doyle Thames, the pro, and his wife, Pug. They have been on the scene for 15 years.



Brookridge
General Manager
Lee Gehrig

● A recently renovated "19th Hole" cocktail lounge and grill room. Combined, they seat 128 persons.

● A banquet room with seating for 500 persons for large parties such as the Mothers Day event which draws 1,000 diners and St. Patrick's and Valentine's parties.

Included in the main dining room line-up is the Fireplace Room with seating for 33 people and has live entertainment. The View Room accommodates 40 diners and offers a view of the golf course. Done in a contemporary theme, it is decorated with hanging plants and modern chandeliers. The cocktail lounge which opens off the lobby seats 64 persons.

● The Garden Room, the latest and most imposing dining facility, seats 88 and was made possible by a relocation of the ladies locker room from the main floor to the lower level.

"In this maneuver, we turned an unproductive facility into a productive one — the dining facility," said Lee Gehrig, general manager. "The ladies' locker operation didn't generate much income on the main floor. By moving it downstairs where it is near the course and the pro shop where golfers sign up, we now enjoy 100 percent locker rentals."

Features of the Garden Room, which was designed by Kansas City architect Jerry Jackson, include four round booth sections which seat 12, 10, eight or six persons. The booths are elevated. The crowning eye-appeal point of the room is a centerpiece of waterfountains and plantings of live flowers and plants. The greenery here cost an excess of \$2,500. The room is decorated in bright green and orange hues.

Gehrig notes with satisfaction how the food operation of the club has been turned around. Before modernization and expansion, the selection of items was low and the quality was inferior. First, a skilled chef was hired and other key preparation people brought in. Then the menu was expanded to include more specialty fare. That members have put their stamp of approval on the present food quality is shown by the fact that some 1,000 people attend the Mother's Day gourmet brunch

and evening buffet dinner. Such items as Skillet Parisian, a filet mignon dish, for \$7.95 are on the menu. Despite a five to eight percent rise in food cost, the price of items on the menu hasn't been raised for a year.

At any club bent on a general upgrading program, the course is usually a pivotal item. It was at Brookridge. Within the past three years, the entire course, except for the fourth hole has been completely rebuilt to USGA specifications with the old greens torn out and new ones redesigned and installed. Greens superintendent Paul Mitchell with the help of green chairman Bob Cato, headed up the course rebuilding program.

First, a dozer highloader and dump trucks were moved in and the old greens hauled off. The greens were redesigned and grade-staked and a bottom layer graded and contoured to the top of the greens. A layer of herringbone tile then was set in and after that a 3-inch layer of 1½-inch crushed rock. This was topped with four inches of pig gravel and next a sixteen layer of 85-13-2 (85 sand, 13 peat moss and 2 black dirt). Tees were graded to contour. All approaches to the greens were sodded with bentgrass which had been grown under plastic all winter. All banks on the outside of the putting surfaces were sodded with park bluegrasses. All except four of the tees were renovated and set in zoysia grass.

"From this extensive restructuring," said Mitchell, "we gained a more durable, more compact, far more playable course that has the ability to absorb the punishment it gets from the enormously heavy play of our big membership."

Gehrig interjected a note on the course renovation: "We encountered the usual problem of any course that embarks on a rebuilding project — a few players becoming impatient with the confusion and torn-up areas. It's hard to explain to golfers that a club with growing pains needs the cooperation of members willing to put up with hardships. But even these players agree on one point: The end-results of the revamping are worth all the problems. That's shown in the growing volume of play." □

The dramatic feature of the course is Indian Creek which comes into play a total of 11 times in the 18 holes. The No. 5 hole is a par four and the No. 1 handicap hole which plays 455 yards across the creek. The challenging aspect is a huge oak tree which sits 310 yards in the middle of the fairway. On one side is the creek with the tree in the center and the golfer must position his tee shot to the left of the tree and short of the creek in order to get an open shot to the green.

Gehrig, one of the youngest club managers in the nation, has been a catalyst in the Brookridge ungrading campaign. He came to the club five years ago after eight years experience managing military clubs, both in this country and overseas. He attended top military club management schools, was an honor graduate of the Navy Club Management school and the Army Club school. The young manager puts a high premium on his military club experience and training.

His easy, outgoing Irish ways fit in nicely with the people-oriented Brookridge style. He points with pride to the fact that between 250 and 300 couples assemble for the festive St. Patrick's function. That there are 200 members in the junior golf program. And that some 300 families make intensive use of the eight tennis courts.

"My idea of a good, people-serving club is one with moderate dues that puts playing golf and the social functions within the means of most middle-management people," said Gehrig. "It shouldn't be an out-of-reach luxury for those people."

Brookridge has a total staff of 125 employees. With the manager overseeing the activities of department heads who are given considerable latitude in running their orbits, it is seemingly a smoothly run organization.

The club has progressed more than a little since it came under the present management 15 years ago and the situation was so shaky it was a question whether the club would open up from one day to the next. That isn't a question any longer. The question now is just how far the club will go as it keeps reaching for greater targets. □