

GOLF BUSINESS PROFILE

Renovation doubles club membership and income

by Grier Lowry

"One of the hallmarks of an outstanding club is an abundance of activity — not merely a major affair now and then, but activity on a regular basis. And smaller, lively events held frequently," says Reuben Levine, manager of Meadowbrook Golf & Country Club, Prairie Village, Kan.

With that kind of philosophy, it is understandable that the two significant words in the Levine business vocabulary are "parties" and "promotions."

The trouble was that until last April, "Rube" Levine didn't have the physical facilities to match his activity-oriented concept. Until then, Meadowbrook was operating with a small clubhouse which Levine called "our little country store."

Last year a transition was engineered. Seventeen acres of land on which the clubhouse rested were sold, and the proceeds supplied the capital for a major upgrading. The entire operation, including course and clubhouse, was merely shifted to 20 additional unused acres owned by the club.

Improvements included a new clubhouse, a new Olympic-sized swimming pool, a golf course that was rebuilt from scratch with new greens and fairways, and six tennis courts.

The impact of the renovation on club fortunes was instantaneous. The membership shot up from 200 to 425. Revenue from all income sources — food, car and greens fees, pro shop sales, etc. — increased from \$500,000 annually in the old location to more than \$1 million in the new location.

Focus on the clubhouse

Situated in a suburb of Kansas City, Meadowbrook serves a residency that ranks among the highest per capita in-

Grier Lowry is a freelance writer based in Independence, Mo., who writes frequently for golf trade and consumer magazines.



Pro Vince Bizik doubled his shop's business after it was expanded from 450 to 850 square feet. Strong promotion helps, too.

Hanging rack displays in strategic spots in the Meadowbrook pro shop have helped increase sales. Well-known brandnames are prominently displayed.

come groups. Levine came on the club scene 3½ years ago after a successful 20-year stint as the owner of a cocktail lounge/restaurant in the area.

It was natural in the upgrading project that Levine put a high premium on a functional clubhouse that would accommodate a broad variety of functions. He wanted a facility that would permit handling weddings and other functions and maintain a high level of service in other areas at the same time. The kitchen, for example, would be geared to serve 150 people a la carte in the main dining room and 155 people in a wedding party.

The architect, Lynn Scott Haylett of Kansas City, designed a 26,000-square-foot, ranch-style clubhouse built on two levels. It incorporates

locker rooms, saunas, pro shop, 19th hole, and snack bar on the lower level and has a bar, kitchen, dining room, lobby, five card rooms, and administrative offices on the top level. The main dining room seats 260 persons. They get the kind of good service they like.

Meadowbrook has more daytime activity than many clubs, due to intensive usage of the card rooms. Some 60 women use the card rooms daily, and they make steady customers for the dining room.

Dining room supports itself

It isn't an exaggeration to say that today Rube Levine is in his glory. He has the atmosphere and the facility for parties and promotions. One of his

first maneuvers after moving into the new facility was to tackle a dining room problem.

"Our dining room patronage on Friday nights was low," he said. "We have a predominantly Jewish membership and the fact that this was synagogue night was affecting our crowds. We were forced to maintain our regular six- or seven-employee kitchen crew for as few as 40 diners."

In dealing with the problem, Rube Levine instituted a special on family-style fried chicken dinners at the competitive price of \$3.50. The dinner included chicken, salad, mashed potatoes, green beans, biscuits with honey, and a beverage.

"The first Friday night we drew 160 diners," recalls the manager. "The next week we had 180, and now we are serving about 190 diners. And we attract people who order not only chicken, but regular-price menu items as well."

Perhaps Levine's most successful promotion is "Preview Night." It offers a preview, complete with box of popcorn, of a movie not yet shown in the area in a local theater, plus a buffet dinner at the club. Scheduled every 6 weeks, the preview package is priced at either \$6.95 or \$7.95.

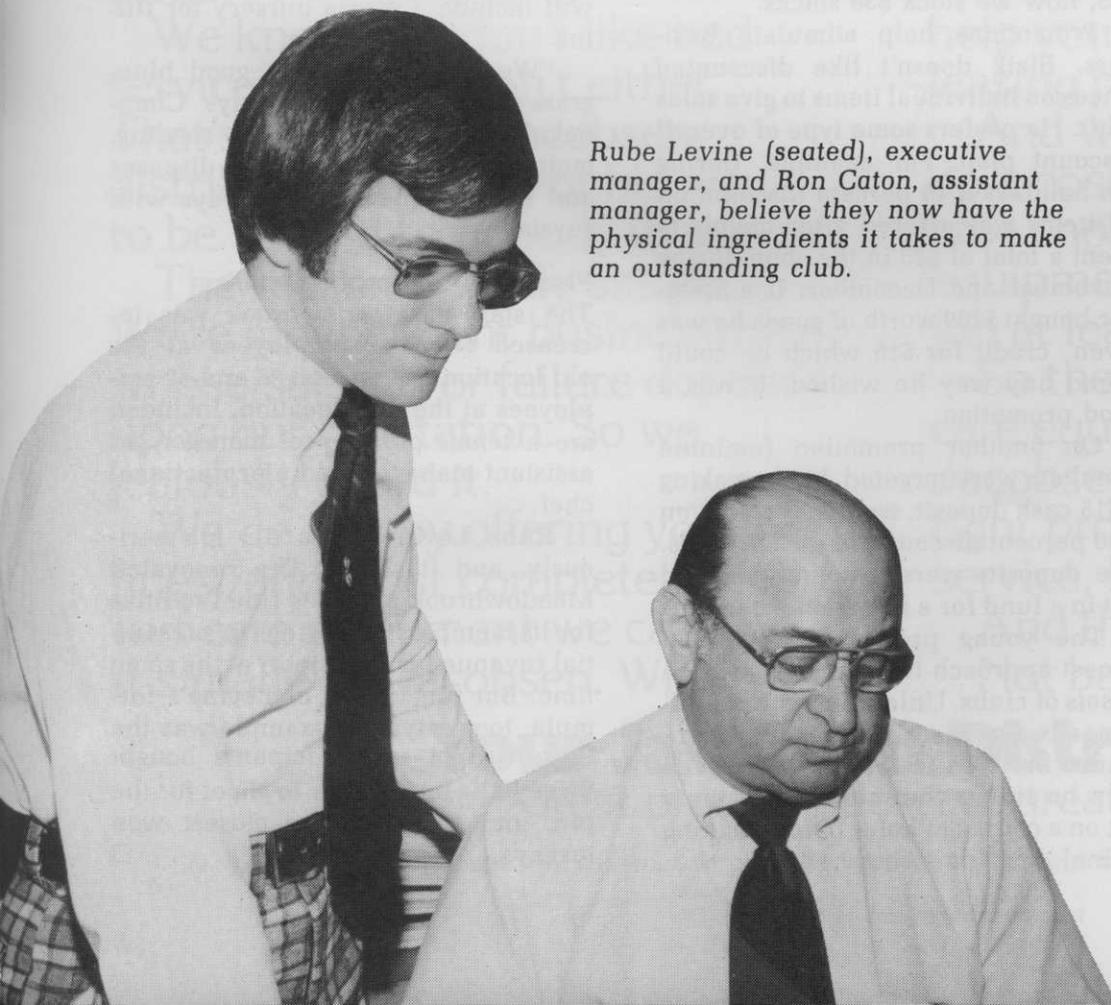
Typical buffet offering: salad bar, smothered chicken, sweet and sour shrimp, carved round of beef, lasagna, two vegetables, butter and rolls, and a dessert table featuring rice pudding, apple cobbler, Jello, and ice cream sundaes.

"We've had the preview package going for 2 years and it's been a sell-out of 225 members every time," Levine reports. "Such movies as *Give 'Em Hell, Harry*, and *The Sunshine Boys* attract members of all ages."

Saturday "Cabaret Nights" are successful. With no raise in price, members order off the menu and special features such as a couple of Arthur Murray dancers demonstrating *The Hustle* may be the added feature. A recent "Cabaret Night" featured a popular comedian. The members-only night drew 220 persons and was so successful it was held over for Sunday night with members invited to bring guests for a sit-down dinner. That drew 400 persons.

"It takes a big dose of creativity and imagination to keep the interest at

"Levine has discovered he can command higher prices for events in the new, stimulating setting. The menu contains such dishes as beef wellington and bananas foster."



Rube Levine (seated), executive manager, and Ron Caton, assistant manager, believe they now have the physical ingredients it takes to make an outstanding club.

clubs high," believes Rube Levine. "Our goal is a big event every month and a smaller event, such as combo night, weekly."

Levine has discovered he can command higher prices for events in the new, stimulating setting. The two main events on the club agenda are the spring formal dance in April and the installation of officers in November. A gourmet dinner is a feature of the spring formal dance. In the old setting, the tab for the affair was \$8.95. It was all the traffic seemingly would bear. The price in the new surroundings has been fixed at \$15. The menu contains such dishes as beef wellington, hearts of palm, small dutchess potatoes, bananas foster, cherries jubilee, and other flaming specialties.

Flaming dishes may be a lost art at some clubs, but not in the Meadowbrook dining room.

At least four items to be flamed are on every dinner menu. Levine is convinced flaming creates atmosphere and interest. Trouble? Not if employees are trained in the technique, he says. Items such as bananas foster, steak Diane, cherries jubilee, baked Alaska, and pepper steak are regular flaming specialties.

A big influence in making the program of events at the club successful is good promotion, says Levine. They must be promoted with finesse and flair. The main tool he employs is a bulletin which announces and describes upcoming affairs. And each one is made to sound greater than any held before. The manager writes the copy and he uses a bit of drama in descriptions.

Levine believes firmly that it is important to set a definite time when reservations are to be made for events, then adhere to it. He refuses to take any reservations before a specified date because some people may get their announcement in the mail before others. For example, for the New Year's Eve party, a crowd of 350 persons can be accommodated. Members were given 3 weeks to make reservations, with December 8 given as the cutoff date.

New pro shop profits

The pro shop, expanded from 450 to 850 square feet, is prospering in the new environment. Vince Bizik, the

pro, says sales have doubled over last year and are still growing. A big factor in the growth, he says, is an expanded inventory with far more selection and depth than in the old shop. He feels it takes about a \$65,000 cost inventory to give customers adequate selection and maintain sufficient backup stock. Sharply departmentalized, the offering includes complete selections for both sexes of items such as sportswear, sweaters, jackets, tennis apparel, slacks, and shoes.

"We're finding we can sell higher ticket goods in our new shop," Bizik says. "We went no higher than \$12 on sports shirts for men before; now

"With a budget of \$325,000, the golf course was almost built from scratch. The third hole gives members something to brag about."

we're doing a good job on \$25 shirts. Before we had no slacks priced over \$25; now we stock \$36 slacks.

Promotions help stimulate business. Bizik doesn't like discounted prices on individual items to give sales a lift. He prefers some type of overall discount plan. For example, during the holidays a 15 percent discount on all items was offered after members spent a total of \$25 in the shop during November and December. If a member bought \$100 worth of goods he was given credit for \$15 which he could spend any way he wished. It was a good promotion.

On another promotion feminine members were targeted. Upon making a \$15 cash deposit, women were given a 20 percent discount on all softgoods. The deposits were accumulated and put in a fund for a ladies' tournament.

The young pro takes a candid, honest approach to selling items such as sets of clubs. Unless a member really needs a new set of clubs, he downgrades the idea to the member. Even then he insists the member try them out on a couple of holes before making a final decision to buy.

Rebuilt course has character

With a budget of \$325,000 the golf course was almost built from scratch. What emerged, according to Sam Chaplick, superintendent of greens, was a "demanding, good membership type course with lots of character." The course has more yardage, more lakes, and better turf than before. It also has what is described as one of the toughest par threes in Greater Kansas City. The third hole, a 230-yard stretch, has a creek in front of the hole, a lake behind, out of bounds on one side, and another lake on the other. It's a hole that gives members something to brag and talk about.

New equipment was bought to maintain the reconstructed course. The \$25,000 earmarked was spent for new tractors, blades, a mower, and a Sand Pro for raking sand traps. Where it used to take one man most of the day to rake the sand traps, it is now a 1-hour job.

Meadowbrook is in the process of switching from bluegrass to zoysia, and for this project Sam Chaplick and his assistant, Jerry Warshaw, first came up with a budget of \$60,000. This was considered too steep, so by cutting yardage of zoysia on the fairways the sum was reduced to \$35,000, which will include a zoysia nursery for fill-ins.

"We simply aren't in good bluegrass-growing country," says Chaplick. "We'll save money on seeding, maintenance, troubles with diseases and insects, and in other ways with zoysia."

Promotion and professionalism

The staff at Meadowbrook was increased from 12 employees at the old location to between 35 and 40 employees at the new location. Included are a tennis pro, a pool manager, an assistant manager, and a professional chef.

Rube Levine takes his job seriously, and it shows. The renovated Meadowbrook provides fine facilities for its members and brings in substantial revenue for its support at the same time. But fun is part of Levine's formula, too. A typical example was the turkey shoot — participants bought three balls for a dollar to shoot for the pin, and those coming closest won turkeys. □