

GOLF BUSINESS PROFILE

Million-dollar transformation — from middle to upper class

by Grier Lowry

Hillcrest Country Club, Kansas City, Mo., is a sparkling example of how one million well-spent dollars can transform a dreary operation, suffering from a downturn in membership, into a class, upbeat operation.

Several years ago the club was at a crossroads. Grass on some of the greens in July and August was virtually nonexistent. The pro shop needed remodeling. The clubhouse was beginning to look dingy, both inside and out. The lockers and showers were out of date and rundown.

Too many people were joining the

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club in April and dropping their memberships in September after the golf season. As a result, the club was starving to death during the winter. The menu had become static and was creating heavy waste. The kitchen was creaky and inefficient. Labor costs were out of sight in the foodservice department. Some young members were sounding off about the absence of tennis courts.

"It was clear to me and the board of directors that we had no other choice if Hillcrest was to survive than to engineer a complete remodeling of the physical plant," recalled Harold E. Roach, manager of the club until early this year.

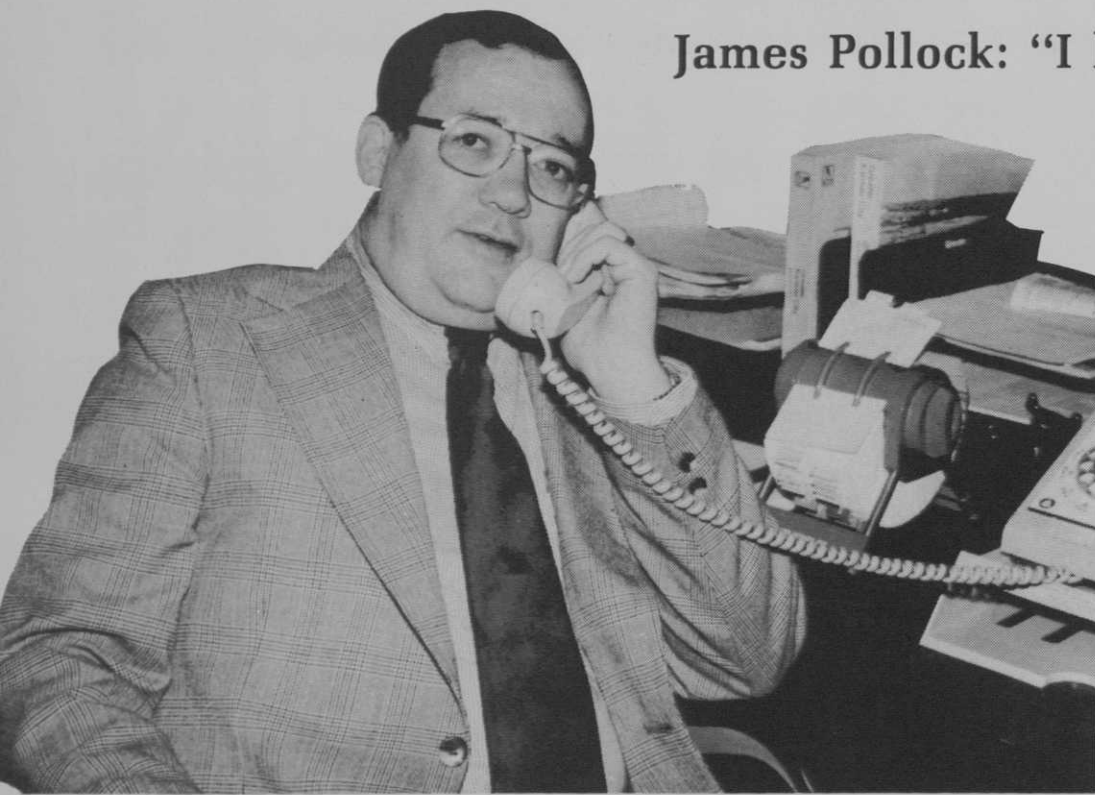
"We had the essentials for a good club to work with," he said. "The

installation of a new link with an interstate highway made our club accessible to all of Greater Kansas City. Though the immediate area is peopled mostly with middle-income types, we were now easily accessible to more affluent income residency of neighboring Johnson County, Kansas, where a lot of young executive type families reside.

"So a decision was made to spend a million on improving the club," said Roach. "The prime objective: Bring the standards up to those of the finest

The million-dollar updating of Kansas City's Hillcrest Country Club included the course, the pro shop, and the clubhouse — as well as the addition of a dozen new golf cars.





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clubs in Kansas City. As part of the effort to raise the improvement funds it was decided to raise the initiation fee to \$1,250 and increase monthly dues to \$85. The stipulation was also made that members spend a minimum of \$10 on food and beverage each month."

Before the full-scale upgrading program got off the ground, Roach and key members of the organization made a close study of other outstanding club facilities in the area. From this research, they mapped out a basic approach for the remodeling, and turned their recommendations over to a Kansas City architect.

Two years later, the benefits were evidenced from all sides. Dissent at the increase in initiation and dues came from some members and a total of 120 resigned when the decision was made. But today the membership is at an all-time peak of 450 golfing members and 175 social members. Significantly, the number of members who joined in the spring and dropped their memberships in the fall dwindled from 60 and 70 to only eight. Higher initiation fees had members thinking twice before canceling their memberships. Food labor costs were about 48 percent, the lowest they had ever been. And foodservice volume and the use of the facilities for group occasions was steadily climbing.

In planning the improvements, Roach said he and the Board kept several things about Hillcrest firmly in mind. First, it attracts conservative, closely-knit family types, some of them on fairly tight budgets. Which motivated the planners to accentuate

features appealing to all members of the family, offspring included. Two, about 30 percent of the families who belong include working wives. Most working wives insist on a strong voice on how incomes are spent and are more active participants in recreation that costs money. In short, according women equal attention with men in planning the remodeling was a prime consideration.

Thirdly, the game of golf is the lifeblood, the heart of the operation, the *raison d'être*, and all other activities play subordinate roles to the game.

Zoysia for the course

Improving the course was the first order of business. Five new greens were built and five new watering heads installed. Another new watering system was installed around the clubhouse. Two years ago the area was hit by a drought and, with play as heavy as usual, the bluegrass all but burned out. Then a decision was made to go to zoysia grass and \$65,000 was spent in getting the program under way.

"We started our zoysia program by researching the excellent course at the Alvarado Country Club in Lawrence, Kan.," explained Roach. "This is one of the finest courses in the country and their zoysia covering is tremendous. We then made arrangement to buy zoysia strips from the club.

"In switching to zoysia we realized we were trading 60 days for 10 months, in other words bluegrass stays green 10 months of the year but falters during the heat and dry weather of

July and August, while zoysia stands up to midsummer punishment but browns early in the fall and is slow to green in the spring."

As a test, zoysia was initially installed on the aprons and approaches. Then extensive strip-planting was inaugurated using a custom tailored cutter for portioning the strips and another cutter for notching out the ground preparatory to laying in the strips.

By strip-planting, as opposed to using plugs, and slushing the strips in good and moist, it was necessary to hold off play only one day. The strips were wetted down and rolled thoroughly.

A good thing made better

Hillcrest's golf program — men's, ladies' and juniors' — is one of the best in Greater Kansas City. The 2-day, 18-hole Mens' Invitational Tournament is outstanding and with a play of 74 teams at \$200 per slot, is always a sellout.

Both the ladies 9-hole and 18-hole programs constantly pulsate with activity. There are an average of 60 in the 9-hole ladies' program and 80 in the 18-hole category. About 80 juniors participate in that program.

"It's a proven fact that if you get women in to play golf, they'll also use your clubhouse, dining room, and cocktail lounge," said Roach. "It worked out that way for us."

The new look at Hillcrest includes four brand-new tennis courts, (cost: \$70,000), two swimming pools, a wading pool, and a picnic area. The redecorated and expanded clubhouse embodies a main dining room seating 160 to 175 guests, a grill seating 60, a cocktail lounge accommodating 60, a ladies' cardroom, and new locker rooms. A dozen new golf cars were ordered.

The new lockers are all identical in size. The old ones came in varied sizes and there was tug of war, generating bitter feeling, for the larger lockers.

The kitchen was rebuilt with additions of new refrigeration, two new ranges, two french fryers, steam table, new radar range, and a Hobart dishwasher and mixer. Instead of replacing them, which would have been costly, the old wooden worktables in the kitchen were sent to a restaurant

pattern to spark the interest of the membership."

supply house where they were covered with stainless steel. End result: Easier cleaning.

The pre-remodeled dining room was cold and uninviting. To add warmth walls were done in light pastel colors, new carpeting and drapery in warm earth tones added, and new chandeliers installed. Diners had a tendency to eat and leave quickly in the old setting. Now they linger and order desserts and after-dinner drinks.

A new club manager

James Pollock, who came to Hillcrest on January 1 from the Casper (Wyo.) Country Club and has managed private clubs for over 20 years, is aware that he inherited a sound operation at Hillcrest.

"The basic program is good," he said recently. "My efforts focus on encouraging higher usage of the facilities by membership. And in accomplishing this objective, we're adding some new features. The problem at any club is that you can move along in a set pattern too long and your program gets a bit stale around the edges.

"What you are doing is scheduling chicken buffet every Wednesday and a seafood buffet every Friday and nothing ever changes," he said. "I like the idea of breaking the pattern and sparking the interest of the membership. Of introducing a new feature designed to spur their use of the facilities."

In his first step in this area, Pollock introduced a Wednesday night International Cafe, a buffet featuring the food of a different country on each occasion. So far, food from Germany, Italy, France and the southern sector of the United States have been featured. The feature is priced at \$6 and attendance averages 150 on each occasion.

"Don't let me create the wrong impression," the manager warned. "This club offers a number of good, traditional activities that we will retain. But now and then we'll implement with something new."

Another one of his objectives, the manager said, is to promote greater usage of the four tennis courts built last year. Activity on the courts was sparse last year and Pollock plans to push their use harder in club publica-

tions — the monthly newsletter is well read — and in personal encounters with membership.

He displays keen appreciation for one beneficial aspect of the operation: Low employee turnover. He points out that he inherited a nucleus of employees who had been with the club for over 10 years and a large percentage who have been on the staff for over 5 years.

Another step taken this year involved another increase of the initiation fee, from \$1,250 to \$2,000. Dues remain the same, and the manager hopes they can stay as they are until next year.

New pro, new look

The pro shop was the setting for another big changeover at the Kansas City club since the 1st of the year. "Dutch" Stamberger, a fixture in the shop for 20 years, retired. He was replaced by Dale Howell, who had formerly managed the pro shop at the Hutchinson (Kan.) Country Club and was a former assistant at Crackerneck Country Club in Independence, Mo.

There has been a big shakeup in the pro shop since this young manager assumed control. First, he quadrupled the inventory, broadening the selection of name brands, expanding the offering of clothing, with special focus on the ladies' area, and completely reshuffled the physical layout.

In rearranging the shop the basic plan was to put staple items in convenient locations for members to inspect. For example, clubs, balls, and bags are displayed near the counter where members register for cars. It was also a goal in retailing the physical setup to departmentalize all products, to put all ladies clothing together, all men's shirts together, etc. "In displaying all categories, whether clothing or clubs, our basic plan revolves around putting different brands together so members can make easy comparisons," said Howell. "Our heavier inventory includes a wider offering of brands," he noted. "We recognize the influence of national advertising on how our members buy. If they see a golfer use an iron in a new brand on the tour, they want it. "Proper display combined

with variety in clothing and equipment are strong factors in successful pro shop merchandising," Howell believes. "We feel that we've upgraded this shop in both those areas and we're already realizing dividends from the program in the form of increased business." The Kansas City pro shop operator gives one display as a sparkling example of how a single feature can boost volume. Golf clubs are displayed in a custom-built rack which he designed himself and which has been copied by other shops. This display rack shows 40 different sets of irons in a 12-foot span. This is the fourth such display he's had in his shops, said Howell, and he's had to make several alterations before it fit specifications. Each club fits into a groove and getting these holes the proper distance apart was a matter of trial and error. The display keeps the clubs orderly, it is accessible and is compact. A lot of the future potential of the shop, believes this pro, is tied to making it appealing to the feminine membership. This involves stocking a wider selection of women's clothing and showing it effectively. One revolving hanging rack holds five dozen pieces. "But the point isn't entirely selling the ladies items for themselves," he said. "They still select clothing for their husbands. You can stock a \$10,000 cost inventory of women's lines and the attraction is has will produce \$5,000 worth of sales in men's apparel. The ladies will select items for their husbands while looking over your offering of goods designed for them." No other category gives a shop a fuller, more inviting look than bags, believes Howell. And looking well-stocked is of paramount importance in the business, he says. He will normally show between 90 and 125 bags on wall shelving — with a few new models shown by the entrance on the floor — and that's the kind of bag selection he feels is necessary to keep sales coming. Pollock, the club manager, and Howell, the pro, teamed up in playing hosts at an open house scheduled to get the new pro shop look off the ground. With champagne the featured refreshment, these two key members of management at Hillcrest were heartened by the good turnout of members and friends to view the changes. □