

Golf clubs today are the haunts of many a varied character, transcending social barriers and attracting both working class and aristocracy alike. In fact, regardless of your social history and given the right connections, just about anybody has a good chance of being accepted into an established golf club. The only qualifications required are a small knowledge of the game, a friend who is already a member, a willingness to part with a few readies and the patience to endure many years of waiting.

It has always amazed me how in this day and age of turbulent economies, business strategies and cut-throat competition that the golf club sees fit to maintain a never-ending waiting list. Surely the number one rule of business is to ensure the price fits demand. If demand is high then so should be the price. True, a golf club is not strictly a business, but it does provide a service to paying customers and the quality of that service is dependent upon financial input. If people are not prepared to pay the necessary money for that standard of service, then they do not get in the club.

Assuming a golf club is efficiently run then the member pays the money and he or she has no right to complain "Why is that society booked in today just when I want to play?". Because we must subsidise your annual dues. "Why then is the rough not cut on the fourth?". Because you are not prepared to pay for enough greenkeepers or equipment to have this done on a regular basis. "Why does it take me five hours for a round of golf?". Because the course is saturated with golf in an effort to keep down the subs. It's a bit like someone buying a Metro and then complaining to the manufacturers that it will not do 180mph. Well, of course it won't, you've bought a Metro and not a Ferrari.

No doubt many club members reading this will at this point be somewhere between slightly irritated and extremely angry. "But I pay a bloody fortune!" they will explode, as if that gives them the right to complain. Well, I will concede that in some circumstances that is the case, but in those cases standards are very high and there is therefore little to complain about. Generally speaking though, this fortune theory is somewhat debatable.

For example, if I want to play snooker it will cost me £4 an hour even though I am a club member. Let's call it £2 because I will split the cost with my playing partner. If I then play for as long as it takes me to play a fairly quick round of golf it will cost me 3 x 2 = £6. Quite cheap when you think about it. But if, like a typical club golfer, I play twice a week then my annual budget for snooker is £600, or more than the vast majority of golf clubs' annual subs. Six hundred quid just for the hire of a snooker table. But what if, like many a club member, I play four times a week. Twelve hundred pounds! I'd be better off buying my own table, which is a lot easier than buying my own golf course.

Strangely, the same thing applies directly to golf. If I find the cheapest "pay and play" in the area, queue up for an hour and then take five hours to hack round a course filled with divots, novices, unraked bunkers and greens that would do Twickenham an injustice, it would still cost me ten pounds. If I then decided to endure that 200 times a year I would be paying £200, or roughly three times the annual subscription of the Royal what-do-you-call-it just down the road. No wonder it's got a waiting list that goes into the next millennium.

Now having explained my argument that the average club has got a proverbial "right result", I will admit that

TALKING HEADS

BY MARC HARING

The start of a new series in which head greenkeepers and others are given a chance to voice their opinion on matters important to them

some members have indeed got cause to complain, eg. the member who plays infrequently and who perhaps joins the club as a status symbol, or a means of entertaining clients. He or she may only play ten or twenty times a year, but still pays the same as our old friend who whinges his way through 200 rounds a year.

Now surely, looking at this system rationally, something has gone drastically wrong. Why on earth don't golf clubs charge green fees to members? Not necessarily the full amount but perhaps five or even ten pounds should suffice. New golf clubs giving the golf business a fresh outlook often adopt this system, after all it makes sound business sense. To the best of my knowledge, no established members' club has yet adopted this system and are surely therefore sentenced to a life of catering for the daily fourball, where shoes are changed in the car park and where a half pint of shandy is only invested in on the rare occasion of a hole in one.

I am not advocating driving the avid golfer off the course, but surely golf is an expensive game. It involves the upkeep of a vast expanse of sports turf and if someone wishes to spend their life on it they should pay the appropriate dues. Besides, by charging a green fee to members, annual subscriptions could even be reduced and some members will actually pay less for their golf.

Now how did this peculiar state of affairs ever come about? Well, I have a theory. As we are all aware, golf in those far off days of the twenties was a game for the proverbial toff. Back in the days of PG Wodehouse and before, plus fours and hunting tweeds were the order of the day. I will strongly contend that at that time when so many of our golf clubs were being established, the subscriptions were actually higher than they are now. They may only have been four or five guineas but that would equate to an average man's monthly salary or the equivalent of something in excess of £1000 in today's money. Rural golf clubs and clubs in Scotland had annual subscriptions that were within range of the working class, but at these clubs overheads were extremely low. One greenkeeper, who may also have been the professional, together with a flock of sheep for mowing duties and fertiliser application, was quite sufficient for the upkeep of the course. A steward, his wife and a part-time secretary took care of catering and administration in the clubhouse. The golf courses received considerably less play than they do now and it was common practice to close the course for the winter months. Courses were thus well able to cope with the odd obsessive golfer and so such individuals were not considered a problem. Annual subscriptions were therefore the simplest and most practical means of financing the club. They would have been fixed, as they are now, by the committee and it is there that the problem lies. Although the courses, traditions and the game's popularity have changed immensely the system of financing the operation has not for two reasons:

1. The committees are loath to change for fear of public opinion, amongst other things;
2. In the main, committee members are the very people who would lose out if a members' green fee system were brought in.

After all, committees are elected because they are respected members of the club and that respect is gained by regular attendance. Their faces are seen all the time. If you don't believe me think of your own club committee, are they not regular golfers, Saturday and Sunday and perhaps the odd afternoon and evening during the week? Not only that, but are they not in regular contact with the more frequently visiting member? The result is that the members who play less frequently are the ones who have less say. The whole system encourages more and more golf from every quarter and the inevitable consequences are more and more problems. Golfing traditions have changed drastically over the years and I believe the subscription system will have to do likewise.

Now before I am tarred, feathered and expelled from society as some sort of militant revolutionary, let me speculate on the consequences of this fairer means of paying for one's golf. In my opinion, one of two things will happen. Either the regular golfer will not play so frequently or he will accept the additional cost and pay more for his or her golf.

In the first case, the course will be significantly less busy. This will result in improved course conditions, reduced maintenance costs and quicker, more enjoyable rounds. Alternatively, the powers that be may decide to make up for this shortfall in golf by introducing more members, thereby eating into the waiting list and increasing revenue.

In the second case, where the member continues to get his daily shot of golf but at a higher price, the club's revenue will be increased – to be spent no doubt with great foresight by the elected committee.

"But what about the potential champion, or the county captain who just happens to be a member, they need somewhere to hone their skills?" Well, of course there is the practice ground, that is the place to hone any latent talents they may have. Hopefully they do not practise on the course anyway.

"Ah! But what about the golfer who merely requires a bit of exercise in his retirement?" you may argue. "Surely it would be a sin to expect him to pay the additional fee?" Well, if the committee is worried about being labelled the slayers of the frail and needy, may I suggest a bit of diplomacy. A reduction for the odd minority group would be a tactful decision under certain circumstances.

I am not advocating a huge green fee for all members that would result in mass resignations, simply a change to a fairer system. I believe that all reasonably perceptive members will acknowledge that membership of a club that requires a five or ten pound course usage fee is infinitely preferable to the local pay and play, or to putting down a £2000 deposit for membership of a club that hasn't even been built yet.

Golf doesn't have to be prohibitively expensive, in fact for many it should be even cheaper that it is now. I do, however, believe that clubs ought to start recognising how popular the game has become and start changing to a fairer system of paying for it.

■ Marc Haring is head greenkeeper at Camberley Heath Golf Club.

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