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Tony Hawes, Course Manager, Potters Bar Golf Club



On the Soapbox

A vehicle to let people within the industry express their point of view, this month with Dean Cleaver of FEGGA

During the last two years I have spent many hours attending meetings at which the growth of the game is discussed.

Let me start by saying that I am not negative towards this challenge and it should be taken serious with the focus of introducing new people to this wonderful game that millions already enjoy.

This challenge differs from country to country and while the new emerging countries are truly growing a game from the very beginning and without any history, which certainly has many advantages.

If you look at the more established countries the challenge differs considerably.

For these countries such as the UK, I really do not believe they are losing golfers, golf clubs may be losing golfers and there are numerous reasons why, and these need to be seriously addressed by golf clubs in terms of service and customer relationship skills.

They also need to move closer towards today's modern person, this young person who fits into modern society and believe or not is a very normal person and wants to play golf.

There are some very good examples of clubs that have changed and adopted a new business model and have benefited greatly and in the case of my own golf club gained many extra members during the last year.

I also think that golf clubs can really gain from looking at some of the good leisure clubs that are available today, offering a great experience in a modern environment and coupled with the service expected today.

Today's person does also not necessarily want to join a golf club, but play where they want and when they want. I appreciate that this creates challenges with budgeting and ensuring golf clubs maintain a healthy turnover, but offering the right product coupled with good customer service will meet the needs of today's golfer and tomorrow's new golfer.

There are also some great examples of what golf clubs are doing in countries like Sweden that can and are being successful with member clubs. One real area of success is local clubs coming together and offering golf at each others' clubs at a reduced rate at certain times of the day.

This gives variety and a much wider golfing experience for their members. They also welcome non golfers into their facilities to enjoy the restaurant and allow these people to experience what golf can offer, and it works, I have seen it.

Returning back to the new emerging golfing nations we also have a responsibility to grow the industry to support growing the game, otherwise we risk the problems we have had in countries such as Sweden and Finland, where the result is not enough trained professional greenkeepers to maintain this growth.

There is still evidence of this today and when looking at some of the more prominent positions in Sweden, there are still non-Swedish greenkeepers managing these golf courses. This is not sustainable and not the answer to dealing with the problem.

I have seen reductions as clubs make cost cutting exercises and this really makes little sense when looking at the future and the long-term success of its business

Good education and investing in providing the skills for people to manage and maintain our golf courses is the answer and to bring out the vision that many of these people have will enable innovative business planning to ensure sustainable growth and development for the future.

In the economic downturn that we have experienced during the last year, this was certainly a time for maintaining and increasing the investment in education and training, it's a small percentage of a budget, but one that has huge benefits.

I have seen reductions as clubs make cost cutting exercises and this really makes little sense when looking at the future and the long-term success of its business.

The Czech Republic has a great model to look at, they have developed and grown a game for their own people to take up.

They have designed and built golf courses to meet the challenges of people playing the game for the first time. They have been developing an industry that has grown to support the game.

They currently have 82 golf courses with 46,000 players, of which they have 15% of this number being juniors.

They have grown a tremendous Greenkeeper Association having currently 200 members and are developing good education and working closely with the Agriculture College in Benesov developing standards based on the egeu Standards (www.egeu.org)

One final thought, as we all know golf can take at times too long to play, especially in the busy world we now seem to live in.

I have recently come back from Iceland, where they have a total population of 320,000 and during the last year have increased their golf player numbers by 5% and currently have 50,000 playing golf, of which 30,000 playing five times or more per week, a success in itself, but of the 65 golf courses in total, 50 are nine hole courses, interesting thought.



Dean Cleaver,
Executive Officer of the Federation of European
Golf Greenkeepers Association, (FEGGA) and
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Dean Cleaver

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