

Where Have All the Golfers Gone?

Over the past five years I cannot count the number of discussions I have been in where the topic has been the state of the golf industry, and where have all the golfers gone? These discussions have occurred at seminars, at meetings with other superintendents and golf pros, at weekly meetings with our park director and golf staff, and at a golf summit we host with other public golf courses. I have finally come to the conclusion that there are answers to these questions, however, they are not simple answers, and there is definitely more than one. With that in mind I'd like to go ahead and discuss where the golfers have gone and why.

The first and what I feel is the most important issue that has affected our industry is the changes that our culture and society has been through over the past twenty years. Over the past two decades, life priorities, time management, and daily stresses have taken over our American lifestyle. In an effort to further explain this, I'd like to share one of the responses Dr. James Dobson, of "Focus on the Family," gave when he was asked what he would identify as "marriage killers" in today's society. His response was Over Commitment and Physical Exhaustion. He said, "Do not try to go to college, work full time, have a baby, manage a toddler, fix up a house and start a business at the same time." The reason I use this statement is because this is the exact stage of life that many of our 30-40 year old golfers are in. So, I'm trying to figure out where a round of golf will fit into their agenda. Most likely it won't, golf has taken a back seat to other priorities.

With the advent of the twenty-first century, the battle for a person's time and attention has become paramount. Unfortunately, this battle has grown to encompass golfers of all ages. Years ago I was visiting with a fellow superintendent who said that on any given Saturday or Sunday afternoon 30- to 40-year-old males are almost non-existent on the public golf courses. This is a result of the number of children involved in traveling sports teams. In fact, children's sport teams in general have entire families involved for weekends at a time. And when is this all taking place?—during the prime of golf season. Later in the article I will address the challenge of vying for people's time. I still haven't even touched on how to get Mom involved in golf!

The second issue I want to address is what has happened to all our junior golfers? One simple answer is that the youth of today have so many options for what to do with their time. The age of technology has robbed young people of their free time. Day after day many spend countless hours playing video games, talking on cell phones, sitting in front of computers, or listening to Ipods. If not involved in the aforementioned activities, many youth are encouraged to

participate in a favorite sport or activity that many times requires them to train year round. It becomes apparent that not only are we in a time battle for our middle age golfer, but the battle for junior has become just as tough!

Last, but not least, I want to discuss the number and style of golf courses that have been built over the past twenty years. During the building peak of the '90s, I believe we, as an industry, were not aware of the subtle changes going on in the attitudes and behaviors of our golfing public. As the number of golfers slowly began to dwindle, we heard the constant cry that we needed to open a new course each day of the year. Not long ago, I attended a meeting where Bradley Klein, of Superintendent News, stated "it is more likely now that we need to close a course per day." Not only were we building more courses, we were designing and building the visually stimulating, upscale public golf course. As more courses opened, competition increased, greens fees eventually needed to become more competitive (cheaper), and at the same time the maintenance costs of these visually stimulating courses became more expensive.

Somewhere during the amazing building frenzy of the '90s we also lost sight of one of our most important treasures, the Average Joe golfer. Average Joe is the guy or girl that is an average golfer, at best, and plays golf for the fun of it. According to statistics from USGA agronomist Larry Gilhuly, 95% of all golfers have a handicap of 15 and above, men averaging 16.1 and women 29.2. Average Joe is more concerned about the price of greens fees and tee-time availability than he is about how tough or visually stimulating a course is. In fact, in a 1996 NGF survey, only 12% of golfers surveyed mentioned that course design was important to them. A mere 5% listed difficulty of the course as important. The take-home lesson from this is that while we as an industry were focused on building fantastic, upscale golf courses, all Average Joe wanted was a well kept course, near home, with available tee-times, and all at a fair price.

Now that I've shared what I believe are the main causes for our golfers disappearing, where do we go from here? How does the golf course industry reestablish its niche in an active person's lifestyle? It's not an easy task, but I believe it can be done; here are a couple of ideas to make sure we're on the right track.

Every golfer that steps onto our courses is not only a customer, but also our guest and needs to be treated as such. This was Disney's philosophy in his theme parks from day one. The pro shop staff, ranger staff, and maintenance staff all need to adopt this philosophy to the max.

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"Chuck the Chicken" at Prairie Bluff Golf Club. A fundraising game used during a foundation outing where contestants launched rubber chickens with a slingshot.

Provide a golfing atmosphere that is fun and relaxing. Speed of play is important, but how many times have we heard golfers leave the course complaining about being tired of being timed or being hounded by golf course rangers.

Don't skimp on course conditioning. In the 1996 NGF golfer's survey, course condition was listed third, behind only the cost of green fees and tee-time availability for a course's appeal.

Find out why your regular and permanent tee time golfers come back, or why they don't return, then address those issues.

Finally, we need to continue to be innovative at our own individual golf courses. Every course is different. What works for one course may not work at another. Be creative, our park district recreation staff always has great ideas for us to try at our golf outings. The most recent contest we used at our park foundation outing was called "chuck the chicken." Let your imagination be your guide on that one. The idea is, let's have fun!

When all is said and done I believe we as an industry need to remember one of the main reasons golf was created: to enjoy the game, to be with friends, and to do it all within the framework of nature.



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