

Private club members join forces to keep Fla. course a private affair

By GLEN WINTER

Nearly five years ago, members of Suntree Country Club in Melbourne, Fla., discovered their club was for sale. Galvanized by the desire to keep the facility under local control, they raised \$7 million and purchased the club. Today, they face the challenges of competing for new members with the myriad of golf clubs in Central Florida, as well as managing the club.

With two 18-hole golf courses, tennis club, clubhouse, and pro shop to manage, Suntree's board of directors has been put on a steep learning curve.

At the same time, General Manager Michael Gracie has had to adjust to dealing with the committee structure, understanding and responding to member needs and answering directly to the board. Having been in various management capacities with Suntree since 1984, Gracie has seen many changes since the club was purchased. "I have been pleased with all the help the members give and how much they bring to the table," he said. "These are people who have been very successful in life and they want to enjoy all the amenities the club has to offer, so we try to respond to them."

One of his responses has been to replace nearly every department head. He explained there is a different mindset required of managers in an equity club. "They must be very responsive to members, while working within their budget. It is really an attitude," he said. "The staff needs to understand every member is now, in a sense, their boss and they must treat them accordingly."

To emphasize this, Gracie has an organizational chart on his wall with the word "Members" prominently displayed in the top box. As an example, he cited their tennis pro. "He has revitalized our entire tennis program primarily through his smiles, enthusiasm and response to members." Gracie is looking for those same qualities in his search for a new golf pro.

With an aging membership, many former golf members no longer play and have switched to social memberships. New members have been hard to come by. The original membership of 750 at the time of the purchase is now less than 700. Comptroller Wendy Knipple said 70 percent of club members are retired and reaching an age where they no longer play golf. Recognizing this problem, the club has instituted some new programs such as a summer camp for children in order to attract more families.

Having great programs is one thing, while marketing them to potential new members is another. "The former corporate owners of the club had a national advertising program we cannot afford," Gracie said.

Added Knipple: "Our marketing program is focused on achieving a more balanced membership between families and retirees, which will add to the long-term stability of the club."

Suntree's marketing program includes incentives to existing members and realtors who bring in new members, hiring

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a new membership marketing/sales director, time payment plans, one-year trial memberships and local advertising.

Since 1990, four new 18-hole courses have opened in Brevard County and a total of 17 courses in the six-county Central Florida area. No shortage of golfing alternatives exist. However, Suntree's management and members firmly believe the club is one of the best bargains in the area. There is an obvious pride in the club and the fact members were able to raise \$7 million to buy the facility.

"The courses and the facilities have

never been in better shape," Gracie said.

Of course, mistakes have been made. At the time of purchase, about 150 members did not become equity members although they were grandfathered in as associate members. They paid higher dues and were not allowed preferred tee times. Although the latter has changed, many hard feelings still exist, according to Knipple.

Also, the original bylaws, which have since been changed, specified that members had to be residents of the Suntree Planned Urban Development,

which further limited potential new members.

When asked about the long-term viability of the club, Gracie, responded: "We have a great community that is very affordable, the members are warm and friendly and the club is debt-free. Suntree will be here for a long time."

When asked whether he had any regrets about purchasing the club, Bert Powell, one of the original board members, said, "It was the only reasonable decision, otherwise the club would have been converted to a resort club."



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