

Combat declining membership with new tactics

Membership at private clubs has been faltering since the new millennium began, but a refreshed look at what draws members could help clubs increase membership, says Candice Clemenz, Ph.D., of the Pamplin College of Business at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Clemenz conducts and analyzes research about country club and golf club memberships and gives presentations about increasing membership. The challenge for golf and country clubs is facing more competition.

"The challenge for clubs as they entered 2000 was that they were competing with more and better competition that frequently had a financial edge, and the total market size was the same as pre-1990 because the forecasted increase of the number of golfers didn't materialize," she says.

At the turn of the 20th century, 80 percent of golf courses were private, and there was a significant difference in the quality of play between private and public courses, Clemenz says, adding it wasn't until 1990 that daily-fee courses became a significant rival for private clubs. It was during the 1990s that an increase of golfers was predicted,

and in response, many high-end, daily-fee golf courses were built.

Clemenz cites a McMahon Group study of country/golf club owners that shows only 17 percent of respondents had more memberships in 2003 than in 2001, where 44 percent reported having fewer members in 2001, and 39 percent reported their memberships to be about the same in 2003 as 2001.

Clemenz conducted research, published in 2006, about waiting lists in private clubs. Usually, the lists are established so private clubs don't exceed the capacity of their facility or as a way to create exclusivity. Waiting lists usually are an example of the popularity or success of a club.

The study, based on responses from 163 CMAA members, states 31 percent of country clubs had waiting lists. In 2000, a survey performed by accounting/consulting firm Pannell, Kerr, and Foster states 84 percent of country clubs had waiting lists.

According to Clemenz's study, clubs with waiting lists were between 50 and 100 years old, were member owned and tax exempt. Clubs with larger memberships (between 1,000 to 3,000 members) were more likely to have waiting lists, as were clubs

with gross revenue exceeding \$5 million.

"This seems to say the more contemporary clubs have been unable to capture the same foothold in their communities as clubs that weathered the depression and world wars of the early and mid-1900s," she says.

Contemporary clubs that struggle can boost membership and compete by learning more about potential membership demographics and learning to cater to them.

"A growing number of clubs are employing a membership director or director of members services to focus on membership matriculation by assisting members with the process of sponsoring new members," Clemenz says.

Clemenz suggests membership directors or others at clubs take advantage of resources including the Professional Club Marketing Association and the CMAA, which can provide membership marketing training and information.

Other suggestions include:

- Communicate competitive advantages, which could include creating community, establishing relationships or providing a safe haven away from home;
- Join the growing number of clubs catering to the needs of the entire family, especially children;
- Evaluate pricing structures and consider creating new (and often less expensive) categories to entice nontraditional demographic segments; and
- Offer incentives for members to sponsor new members and/or encourage prospective members to join the club.

— Heather Wood



**THIS IS A
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At the turn of the 20th century, 80 percent of golf courses were private.

CLUB MEMBERSHIP DURING THE PAST 10 YEARS
A CMAA 2007 operations report shows the average number of club memberships

	2007	2004	2002	2000	1998
Golf clubs	442	513	509	457	551
Country clubs	734	697	690	688	670



Work to eliminate localized dry spot

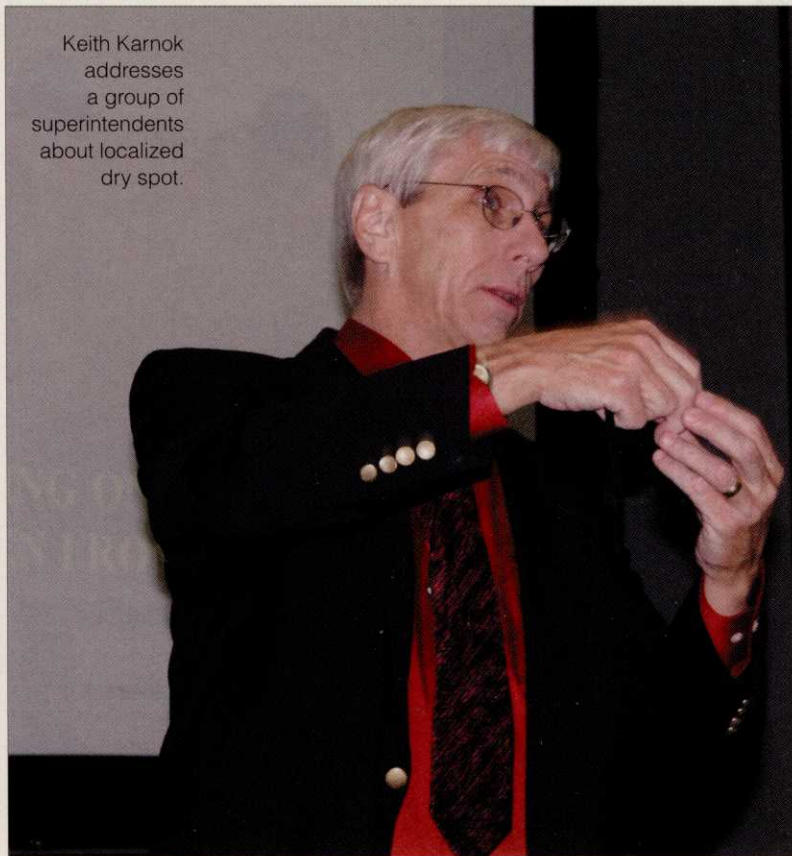
It's one of those afflictions nobody sees coming. Anywhere from eight to 18 months after green construction, when everything seems to be going well, it appears – usually in sand-based greens – with little or no warning. The affliction is localized dry spot, and it starts, like many turf afflictions, beneath the surface.

It's a greater problem now than it was even 20 years ago, says Keith J. Karnok, Ph.D., from the department of crop and soil sciences at the University of Georgia, citing the abundance of wetting agents available on the market. Kar-

nok presented a half-day session about localized dry spot at the recent Golf Industry Show in Anaheim, Calif. An increase in sand-based greens and a decrease in the height of cut on greens partly are to blame for the recent upward trend.

While prevention practices are the best way to avoid the problem, the patches of dry turf that alert superintendents to the problem are sometimes the first sign something's wrong. Knowing more about how it forms can help eliminate it.

Keith Karnok addresses a group of superintendents about localized dry spot.



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Hydrophobic or water-repellent soil causes dry spots. Signs the soil is water repellent include footprinting, blue/green coloration, wilting and ultimately the plant's death. And this isn't unique to golf courses.

"People have been battling this since there have been soils," Karnok says.

To better understand whether a patch of problem turf is a result of hydrophobic soil, take a core sample and test it. Before starting the test, make sure the soil is dry. A hair dryer or fan can be

used to dry the soil gently, but don't put it in a microwave or oven, Karnok warns. Place droplets of water on the sample every half-inch or so. If the droplets sit on the sample's surface, the soil is hydrophobic.

Localized dry spot is caused by a coating of particles that repel the water.

"That coating is the end result of organic matter decomposition," Karnok says. "These organic compounds, when allowed to dry, become very water repellent."

There are different levels of water repellency, and the levels can vary throughout a green. Soil is usually more severely hydrophobic in the summer, and it tends to appear in the top two inches of the soil profile because more organic matter resides there than further down.

Sand is usually the common denominator when water repellency is reported. In fact, coarse-textured soils are more prone to becoming hydrophobic.

"If you've got a sand-based green without fine soils mixed in

and it's a couple years old, you've got hydrophobic soil to some extent," Karnok says.

Clay-rich soil usually is able to protect turf against dry spot.

"Clay's ability to hold a lot of water overshadows the problem," Karnok says.

For those who have dry spots and no sand in the profile, Karnok recommends testing to see what else could be causing the problem. It's sometimes, but rarely, found in fine-textured soils.

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only compound the problem. Factors that contribute to localized dry spot include lower cutting heights; prolific organic matter-producing cultivars; decreased cultivation and topdressing practices; and increased golfer expectations for lush, green conditions. Some try to prevent water-repellent soil by monitoring the soil's critical moisture point – at which soil won't wet.

"In most cases, you won't get to that because it'll be dead," Karnok says.

The hydrophobic coating can't be prevented easily, but there are ways to make it less likely to occur. The best method in avoiding LDS is prevention, Karnok says.

"Strive for a deep root system – beyond the top two inches of the profile," he says. This can be achieved through practices that promote healthy turf."

Once the water-repellent coating sets in, there are ways to manage the soil to hydrate it. Some tests show sodium hydroxide, or Drano, can remove the coating.

"The problem was a little bit of uncertainty

about what's going to happen to the turfgrass," Karnok says.

A popular method of temporarily alleviating the symptoms of water repellent soil is through the use of wetting agents. They work by attaching to the organic coating that causes the repellency and allowing water to be absorbed.

While different wetting agents work on different levels, Karnok hasn't found any agents that did nothing.

"All the common available wetting agents decreased water repellency to some degree," he says.

Karnok doesn't recommend any certain brand because the most ideal wetting agent is defined by the needs of the end user.

There are few advantages of using wetting agents on nonwater-repellent soil, but Karnok says it's a good idea to apply an agent to the entire green because it's likely all soil on the green is hydrophobic to some extent. It just might not be displaying the symptoms as prominently as the dry spots. – HW

PREVENT HYDROPHOBIC SOIL

The best way to prevent localized dry spot is with a turf management program that promotes healthy turf, says Keith J. Karnok, Ph.D., of the department of crop and soil sciences at the University of Georgia.

Healthy practices include:

- Selecting the best turf species/cultivar for the region
- Reducing the amount of nitrogen applied
- Increasing cutting height
- Irrigating properly/evenly – usually LDS appears in areas that haven't gotten enough water
- Following a strict cultivation and topdressing routine to combat accumulation of organic matter
- Not adding to the problem – test the topdressing sand or mix for water repellency before using it



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Golf course architects see more renovations, fewer new projects

As the U.S. experiences a shift in market conditions and demographics, golf course architects have been acclimating to market changes that include more golf course renovation projects and fewer new construction jobs.

This was discussed as the ASGCA hosted a panel at the recent Golf Industry Show in Anaheim, Calif., to share observations of current market trends. The panel included ASGCA associate Gil Hanse, past ASGCA president Damian Pascuzzo and members

Steve Smyers and Doug Carrick.

There was discussion about the latest numbers from NGF, which state there was a net loss of 26 golf courses in the United States in 2006. However, there has been an increase in new golf courses elsewhere, including Europe, the Middle East and South Africa, panelists say.

One of the reasons why golf course closings outpaced openings is the value of the land on which courses lie. During the past seven years, 24 facilities in Myrtle Beach, S.C., closed or



ASGCA members discuss various trends in golf course development.



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have been slated to close, says Greg Muirhead, president of the ASGCA and panel moderator. Land's increasing value has caused several golf course owners to sell their property, he says.

Instead of new course openings, investments are being made to renovate existing courses at private club facilities, says Smyers, who's working on four such projects.

Regarding the trend of new courses increasing yardage, Hanse doesn't try to maximize yardage on renovation projects but rather honors the work of the original architect.

"If we go in and screw around with their design, they're gone forever," he says.

Another design trend has been the tendency toward faster putting surfaces, but Smyers sees that subsiding.

"Golfers will accept more undulating putting surfaces than even a few years ago," he says.

Pascuzzo suggests attendees encourage a reasonable green speed when planning a new course, saying the bulk of the membership likely favors a slower, more forgiving green.

"Talk about it upfront," he says. "Who's your market? You're not going to get a tour here. You'll mostly want them at nine or 9.5, not 10 or 10.5. I want to challenge the player around the green. If you take that tool out of my toolbox, it's going to dumb down the golf course."

People often want architects to make courses easier to play.

"How much easier can we make it?" Smyers asks. "It's not about making courses easier; it's making them more fun and playable."

When there's new course construction in the U.S., it usually is connected with real estate.

"We haven't had a stand-alone project in seven to eight years," Pascuzzo says.

Another factor that's driving the market and acting as an aid to real estate-linked golf courses is the retirement of baby boomers. There seems to be a trend among this demographic of owning multiple homes, with at least one located on or near a golf course.

"They're looking for the resort lifestyle 24-7," Pascuzzo says.

There also are ways to draw younger people to the game with programs such as The First Tee and Play Golf America. Snowboarding, for example, revolutionized winter sports by bringing attention back to the genre when skiing and other snow sports seemed to be losing popularity, Pascuzzo says.

"Golf needs something like that," he says. "Golf has to compete with a lot more now than it did 20 to 25 years ago, including the Internet, games and other distractions."

Between a wider range of entertainment options, cost and player expectations driving potential golfers away, panelists agree the industry needs to grow the game.

"We can continue to throw ideas out, but we need to work in concert," Pascuzzo says. — HW



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Architects say one design trend is toward faster putting surfaces.

Accommodating disabled golfers opens door for revenue hike

A majority of the golf courses in the U.S. are required by law to be accessible to disabled golfers. Some courses are hesitant to move forward, citing the financial burden it could cause. But Martin Ebel, general counsel for the Massachusetts Commission against Discrimination, says not only is it the law, but it can open additional windows for revenue.

Ebel explained what's required during his presentation, Accommodating People with Disabilities – Staying out of Court and Making Money in the Process, at the

USGA Green Section Educational Conference during the Golf Industry Show. Ebel explained most golf courses' responsibilities (and recommended that all courses follow them):

- There should be a policy; it should be written and posted.
- There should be a single-rider golf cart available.
- Golf course employees should be aware of what they can and can't ask of the disabled.

There's no reason not to make the course more accessible, Ebel says. With rounds declining, there's a push to grow the game.

One avenue is to reach out to the more than 54 million disabled people in the country. Plus, the Americans with Disabilities Act applies to most golf courses. All public and municipal courses and most private courses are required to follow it. Plus, it's the right thing to do, he says.

Several arguments against becoming ADA compliant can be disproved, Ebel says. For instance, course operators are often concerned that an ADA upgrade is costly, but Ebel says initial money spent will pay off. Golfers rarely play alone, which means

disabled people likely will bring three others golfers and make it a foursome. And, once word gets out, more disabled golfers will come to play.

It can be more costly not to become ADA compliant because the disabled can file lawsuits against courses that aren't accessible.

"Even if you win at trial, you'll pay \$50,000 to \$100,000," Ebel says, adding it also costs time and aggravation.

He cites the case in 2001 in which pro golfer Casey Martin sued the PGA Tour. Martin suffers from a birth defect in his

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Martin Ebel discusses the needs of disabled golfers.

right leg known as Klippel Tre-naunay Weber syndrome, which can make it painful for him to walk, but PGA rules dictated that he was not allowed to use a cart. The ruling changed that.

“Golf cars need to be supplied to those who have trouble walking,” Ebel says. “It’s that simple.”

A single rider cart purchase doesn’t have to put a golf course out of business. Tax credits are available for some courses. If the course’s budget is below \$1 million, the government will likely share the cost of the equipment up to \$10,000 by way of a tax credit.

Another argument against upgrading for the disabled is that equipment like single-rider carts

can damage the course. Courses, including Pinehurst, that have grass as good as or better than many other courses have single rider carts, Ebel says.

The ADA states golf courses must provide reasonable accommodations. That means the accommodations can’t be expensive, they must provide a safe experience, and they must remove any barriers that might arise for golfers. This includes accessible teeing grounds and weather shelters. There needs to

be a 5-foot-wide path every 75 yards and each green must have a point of entry for the single-rider cart.

Besides the course, parking lots, restrooms, the clubhouse, the pro shop counter and every other aspect of the facility falls under the ADA. The only exemption is if the changes create an undue burden on the course. “This means any alteration so expensive, it would be irresponsible to do it,” Ebel says. However, he adds, it’s hard to prove in court

that the alterations would have caused a burden.

Ebel recommends course managers start by auditing the facility to determine the current level of compliance. If there are changes that could be made, and they don’t create too much of a burden, make the changes. Finally, invest in a single-rider cart.

Despite the ADA and the idea of a possible lawsuit, some golf course owners and managers still are not convinced to spend the money to upgrade. They’re held back by the thought that there is no demand for features that accommodate the disabled.

“I think you’ll find if you build it, they will come,” Ebel says.

— HW



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