

TO HOST OR NOT TO HOST?

by Tim Moraghan



GCI's Tim Moraghan breaks down the pros and cons of whether your club should host a big tournament.

“The downside to all this feel-good emotional outpouring is you now must open your gates to the world.”

Every golf course owner, club member, and golf professional who has watched a big golf event on TV or hiked the grounds during a Tour event or major championship has asked himself: “Can our club do this? What would it take? How do we get one?”

I worked at the USGA in tournament preparation for 21 years, during which time I helped review hundreds of golf courses as potential venues. Not surprisingly, I was frequently asked for my recommendations or insights on how to be selected to host a national championship, from the U.S. Women’s Mid-Am to the U.S. Open. Today, as an independent consultant, I’m still assessing golf courses and providing direction to clubs thinking of pursuing an event.

What’s the single most important lesson I’ve learned: Be careful what you wish for. Hosting a significant tournament is a very generous act and can be a terrific experience. However, it can also be a nightmare for everyone involved.

There is no definitive book or website on the subject, no magic formula to help you decide if hosting is a smart or stupid decision for your club/course. But let’s pretend we met at a cocktail party and you, Mr. or Mrs. Club Member, asked me if I thought it was a good idea for Immaculate Conception Country Club to throw its hat into the ring to host a USGA or PGA, LPGA, Nationwide, or other professional event. How would I respond?

I’d grab another Grey Goose and run down a list of questions that everyone at the club must ask themselves, the literal who, what, where, how, when, and most important, why! Answering “no” to one or more of the following indicates areas of potential concern or probable issues with your club, course, or membership/staff.

Is a majority of the membership in agreement with the “sub-committee” that advocates hosting an event?

Will you allow the host organization’s

to alter your course or club facilities?

Are you willing to open your property to the public?

Is the club able to stand the intense scrutiny of media, social organizations, environmental agencies, and community politics? Do you want to?

Does the club have the financial resources to make design and structural changes to the golf course and property, and then keep them in place after the tournament is gone?

Will the membership be willing to give up use of its golf course and facilities for one to six months during the preparation, execution, and post-event clean-up?

If your club has another course, will the membership accept its probable destruction as it becomes parking lots, television compounds, tents, trailers, roadways, and vendor storage?

Does the club have the community reach and resources to attract enough volunteers to assist in holding the event?

Are there enough competent, capable,

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COVER STORY

“If I’ve seen it once, I’ve seen it a thousand times: Clubs see hosting as a chance to reap a windfall that will keep them solvent for years to come.”

and dedicated members to give up their personal time for two to four years? If not, are you willing to hire those people?

Will your members/staff give up their family and personal time for countless meetings, site trips, and managing the event?

Is your staff professional enough, capable enough, and able to withstand the pressures and stresses of hosting an event? More on this later.

Is the membership willing to engage in a few years of tactical butt-kissing – of association higher-ups, association not-so-higher-ups, on-site staff, outside consultants, vendors, volunteers, and eventually even the players?

Those are just the questions I’d think of while chatting over hors d’oeuvres. I’m sure you can come up with others, many specific to your club, resort, or facility.

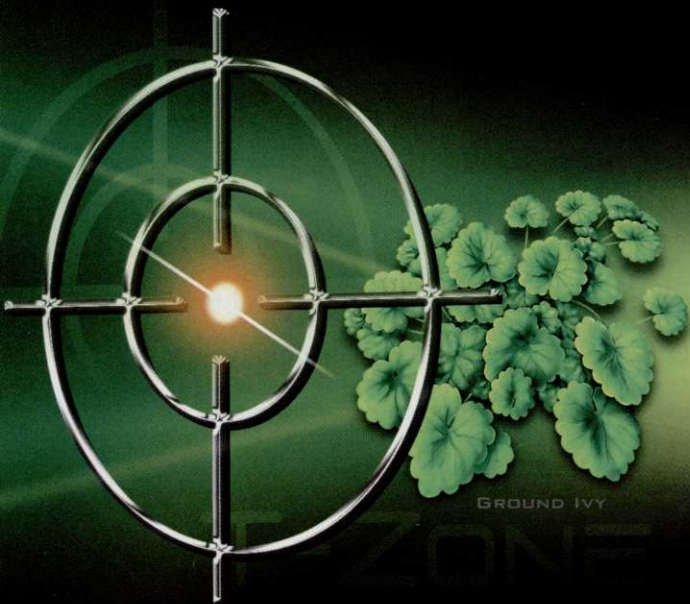
Now let’s say you’re leaning toward hosting. Good for you! Or is it? I’m not trying to dissuade you, but strongly suggest that you consider pros and cons in the following arenas.

Recognition and Visibility

PRO Hosting a national event brings with it prestige and many other positives for your club, its members, and guests. Hosting a major places your facility at the center of the golf universe from the moment its selection is announced until the last putt drops on the final day of play. Then there is the glow of international television and other media exposure. The club will gain the support of local businesses and emergency services departments. Everyone associated with the club will gain hundreds of new best friends, especially if they want tickets. If you’re in a small market without other major sports franchises, your event will become the center of community attention and economic impact, a rallying point for local businesses from bagel shops to country inns. Neighboring towns will want to be part of the action, as well. It’s all pretty heady stuff.

CON The downside to all this feel-good emotional outpouring is you now must open your gates to the world. The media will look into your membership policies and financial solvency. Even small, local events should expect to draw investigation and inspection. Clubs that used to host big events have taken themselves out of contention, preferring to be left alone: Cases in point include Cypress Point, Butler National, and Shoal Creek. I sometimes wonder why Augusta National continues to put up with the scrutiny.

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COVER STORY

Golf Course Improvements

PRO Collaborating with a major golf organization can lead to terrific enhancements to your course. They may engage a world-famous architect to review your property, study its history, and make long-overdue and desired changes to its infrastructure. Club committees and staff likely will work side-by-side with experts in rules, set-up, operations, and agronomy who will raise the profile of your club and unearth the hidden gem that is your course.

CON It's often the case that great things happen to the host club but without anyone from the club having any real input. Disagreements can surface about what is architecturally correct or the original architect's intent. Outside staff moves in and takes over, ordering where to place tents, parking lots, and TV compounds, while issuing decrees on the expected agronomic conditioning—often without regard to local practices, environmental sensitivity, or the weather. (The staff is focused on one week; the rest of you have to think about the other 51.) Everything is fair game for change, from the front entrance to the type of turf on your greens.

Money

PRO If I've seen it once, I've seen it a thousand times: Clubs see hosting as a chance to reap a windfall that will keep them solvent for years to come. As a result, the shared sacrifice can inspire teamwork and harmony among a membership. The expected profits are earmarked for necessary repairs and upgrading, relieve pressure on members for dues increases and assessments.

CON Don't start spending too quickly: From signing a contract to seeing dime one can take years. And, if the event does make the club money, members may want to do it again as a way of making even more, which can become a dangerous – and not always prosperous – cycle. Furthermore, in this weak economy promised gains don't always materialize. Budgets shrink, sponsors don't buy in, attendance is weak... Your club may make a much smaller profit than anticipated, even if the host organization pays for requested changes and improvements. Can you afford the worst-case scenario?

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The Chance to Plan

PRO Hosting can help bring about much needed changes to a course and facility. There will be immediate interest in providing the course with the best possible agronomic conditions so it can withstand the rigors of tournament preparation and execution. Clubs are selected three to five years in advance, during which time courses are prepped, repaired, and treated to the finest in turf grass playing conditions. Together with the host organization, the club will create a long-range plan to accommodate everything from rebuilding putting greens to adding course drainage, replacing bunker sand, and removing trees. This is the chance to make significant improvements to the course and club, and everything should be on the table for consideration.

CON The host club may receive little to no financial support from the host organization to meet its requirements, leaving the raising of funds to dues and assessments. Sadly, when major course-enhancement projects are left to the judgment of club officials few if any get accomplished. If they are pursued, it's generally at the last minute, placing heavy burdens on a staff trying to manage new projects along with their regular duties.

Teamwork

PRO Nothing brings members and staff together like a big tournament. Which is good, because without that, the event will fail. Internal differences are aside for the common good. Outside experts bring different perspectives, which can be especially helpful to the club staff. At the top of the ladder, the club manager, professional, and superintendent are expected to rise to the occasion and shine.

CON Not everyone can take the pressure, and it's during the lead-up to a big event that members and staff get angry and leave. If the tournament occurs annually, like a Tour event, the staff is under extra stress because the merry-go-round never stops: They have to be thinking about the next event before the current one is done. If the event is successful, everyone is a hero. But if there's a problem, heads will roll. And not only on staff: The member who "wanted this mess in the first place"

“And as with most parties, after the guests go home, the host is left to clean up.”

Putting Your Best Foot Forward

PRO It's fun to watch a golf course change personality, and to welcome players, celebrities, and fans. It's very satisfying to see your course and the work of your staff/volunteers showcased on television and other media, and to accept the thanks of the golf world. There is no greater feeling than the collective sigh of relief that comes when the victor hoists the trophy and the event concludes without any major headaches.

CON No major headaches? Are you crazy? Weather can turn the perfect golf course into a mud hole in minutes. Scores are higher or lower than expected, leaving the course – and grounds crew – open to criticism from media, players, even the host organization. (High-definition television leaves the superintendent nowhere to hide.) And as with most parties, after the guests go home, the host is left to clean up. Did you leave enough money in the budget for the post-event work? If yours is a private club, the day after the circus has left town the members will want to get back on their course – but with the same conditions the pros had last week, of course!

Fifty years ago, the then-executive director of the USGA, Joe Dey, wrote, “and what is the club's reward? Thousands upon thousands of man hours are expended by club committee members with no material compensation at all. There is really only one compensation – the same one which comes from any labor of love. For holding golf championship is a labor of love.”

Do I have to tell you that love can hurt? GCI



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