



Douglas C. Louis

An ailing young club gets well

Imaginative and creative thinking, plus cooperation, turns the trick for a Long Island layout.

By HAROLD M. FARKAS

Taking a 96-pound weakling golf property and building it into a healthy country club is the feat that has been accomplished by Douglas Louis in two years as general manager of the Muttontown Golf and Country Club at East Norwich, Long Island.

When Louis was called in at Muttontown at the beginning of the 1964 season, he found the club operating at only 65 per cent of its planned capacity of 250 members, with the restaurant, bar and grill showing an annual loss of \$25,000. Today the membership is at capacity and the deficit on food and drink has turned into \$30,000 profit.

How did Louis do it? Well, not with mirrors. He simply used imagination and creativeness. Without resorting to magic, he raised rather than lowered standards, and a membership that cost \$4,500 in 1962 now costs \$6,500, plus annual dues of \$1,100. He thinks that other clubs that have been finding the going tough might benefit by following his leads.

"When I first came to Muttontown," he told GOLFDOM, "the membership was not only far short of capacity, but it was falling off. There was a marked lack of communication between the club and the members, maintenance was dragging and service was limited.

"We had to member up fast. Fortunately, Leonard Braun, who was presi-

dent of the club from 1963 through 1965, gave me his full support. I must add that Nathan Hirschberg, the new president, continues that policy."

Before Louis came to Muttontown, the club solicited members through newspaper advertising and promotional gimmicks. "I don't approve of these methods. They're cheapening. We drew our prospects through personal recommendation and word-of-mouth publicity. We screened prospective members carefully. We invited them to the club for the day to golf, swim, dine, and meet our members at cocktail parties."

Louis stepped up the social programs, opened channels of communication and stressed the advantages of family membership. Muttontown had been planned as a family club, but to most of the members at the time togetherness was just a word dreamed up by somebody in an ivory tower.

Before Louis did anything about that or correcting other shortcomings, he studied Muttontown's brief history and physical characteristics. The potentials were enormous, he decided; they offered a challenge that could be met.

The property—120 acres of rolling, wooded countryside in the fashionable North Shore section of Long Island—had been acquired in 1961 by real estate developers Louis Goldberg and Robert

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Nathan Hirschberg, president of Muttontown, and his wife, left. Louis says cooperation of Hirschberg and former president Leonard Braun is key factor in success of club.

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Leibovitz from the estate of Herbert Brokaw, a wealthy clothing manufacturer. Goldberg and Leibovitz built a club and leased it to members with an option for purchase. The real estate men laid out an 18-hole golf course, tennis courts and built a swimming pool. In 1965 the members exercised their purchase rights.

The sale included a 44-room, red-brick Georgian mansion that had been Brokaw's home. It was turned into a clubhouse. A six-car garage was converted into a poolhouse with dressing rooms and snack bar adjoining the 60 x 100 foot pool.

After thoroughly familiarizing himself with the setup, Louis put his program on paper and the officers responded with a fast "We'll buy that!" They were particularly impressed by his big selling point: "It's just as expensive to operate a club with limited membership as it is to run one at full capacity—probably more so."

Everything that Louis did to attract new members was the result of much thought. His club stationery and printing reflected dignity. His letters were phrased so that the prospects felt they were being extended a privilege rather than being subjected to a selling pitch. The letters went to families recommended by members and there were also personal phone calls that were not of the pressure type.

Louis came to Muttontown in 1964. He had been with Restaurant Associates

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Novelty is keynote of Muttontown's tourneys. In one, butler serves champagne out on course.





When Louis came to Muttontown, it was "daddy's domain" only. Now it is a family fun center.

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in the first year of the New York World's Fair and his background also included posts with the Melbourne Cricket Club in Australia, the Bahamian Club in the West Indies, the U. S. Officers Club at Mitchel Field, L. I., and the night club aboard the S. S. America. He also owned and operated the Colony Club in Sarasota, Fla., and the Four-Forty Club in New York.

One of the first things he had observed was that wives and children of Muttontown members felt the club was strictly daddy's domain; off-limits except on special occasions. Investigating further, he found this was caused by lack of communication. He overcame this by putting out an informal, chatty newsletter every two weeks slanted strongly toward family fun.

Louis invited members' wives to participate in the club's social activities. "Get the gals on your side," says Louis, "and encourage and work with the 'leaders' in their ranks, and half the battle is won."

Besides the newsletter, Louis also sends out to members a monthly calendar of events, and has set up a bulletin board in the clubhouse foyer.

The newsletter carries congratulatory notices of birthdays, anniversaries and other red-letter occasions. There were—and are—parties and receptions galore: card games, formal and informal dances, barbecues, engagement showers, weddings and confirmation receptions, birthdays and sweet sixteen parties, big dress-up balls for New Year's Eve, Memorial Day, July 4th and Labor Day. The families were convinced that Muttontown cared.

The small fry and teen-agers got the message, too. Louis arranged for them to join in many of the activities—golf, tennis, swimming and social events.

For the kids, he started an arts and crafts center in the poolhouse. He had an area roped off in the shallow end of the pool for children to wade in or take swimming lessons, with an instructor and lifeguard on the job. When a child of 12 or older showed talent with a club or racket, he was permitted to join his parents on the links or tennis courts.

For the teenagers, there is a room in the poolhouse equipped with a juke box, handball courts, table tennis and a snackbar. During the off-season there are back-to-college, Halloween dances and a Christmas party.

Unappetizing dishes had affected din-

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ing room traffic. Weekly menus had remained unchanged for four or five months. Now, menus are varied daily. The cuisine compares with the best to be found anywhere. A large wine cellar has been added to the facilities. Poor service in the dining room had worn the nerves of the members thin. Now, a staff schooled in an intensive employee training program makes dining at the club one of a day's high spots.

Louis came up with the idea of "Around The World" dinners for Wednesday evenings. This has proved so popular that the club has a hard time keeping up with the reservations. Louis owns an extensive library of cookbooks—from the famous *Yankee Cookbook* to *Larousse Gastronomique*—and constant reference to them by the club's chef and his staff makes the members feel like globe-trotting gourmets as they enjoy an "evening in Paris"—Rome, Madrid, Budapest, Moscow, Hawaii, or the Caribbean.

Nor does Louis neglect atmosphere. Every dinner is accompanied by background music of the country being "visited." For the most part this is provided by records amplified through the loudspeaker system. Sometimes this is varied by using a live band. Louis also uses appropriate decorations, and this year he's thinking of putting the waitresses into national costumes.

Once a month, there are wine tasting evenings, featuring the finest of imported vintages.

Friday nights there are shore dinners with fish, Maine lobsters, steamed clams and shrimp. Saturday nights there are regular dinner dances, each preceded by an elaborate smorgasbord.

Sunday evening was a problem until Louis arranged for special family dinners at \$3.75 for adults and \$2 for children. This proved quite successful, increasing the average turnout for that night from 50 to 200, and contributed to transforming the big food-and-drink deficit into a bigger profit.

Except for January, the club is open year-round. The permanent staff numbers 20 and the seasonal personnel is be-

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tween 60 and 70 employees. Louis holds daily meetings with dining-room staff, and goes over the menus with them.

Golf, of course, is the name of the game and Louis lost no time letting out the shaft in the encouragement of competition. Moreover, he used a touch of showmanship and added to the fun.

"Prior to 1964," he said, "Muttontown had an average of only eight tournaments a year. Today, there are sixteen. These include a monthly husband-and-wife, twilight nine-hole tournament which is preceded by a cocktail party on the terrace and followed by an informal dinner dance. Members are invited to dine and dance in their golf clothes.

"We are trying to create as much novelty as we can in our programs. In another husband-and-wife tournament, one of the waiters dresses as a butler, follows the players in a golf car and serves chilled champagne.

"The tournament schedule ends in October with the Weepers' matches, for which consolation prizes are given.

For the serious golfers, golf films are shown in the club's ballroom. Louis plans to develop this program further by showing films of other sports.

One of the charter members at Muttontown recalls the pre-Louis era and speaks glowingly of the changes.

"When Louis came here," he said, "the paint was chipping off the clubhouse walls. Many of the rooms and the foyer needed freshening up. To attract new members, he had to put the place in apple-pie order in a hurry and he did it."

The three-storied clubhouse, rectangular in shape, has 13 chimneys, more windows than anyone has counted and 22 fireplaces. A long, winding carpeted staircase with ornamental grill railing leads down from the second floor to the reception foyer below. On the first floor are the ballroom, the bar and grill, the new main dining room, kitchen and card room, lounges, locker rooms, pro shop, offices and bag storage area.

On the second floor, there are 10 bedrooms with private baths for mem-

bers; on the third floor, 10 staff rooms and Louis' apartment.

In the poolhouse space is provided for golf car storage.

Weekly meetings are held with the maintenance employees and everything is planned with the comfort and pleasure of the members uppermost in mind.

Louis would be the last man in the world to take all the bows for changing Muttontown from an ugly Long Island duckling into a Cinderella golf and country club.

"This was not a one-man job," he says, "and it still isn't. Keeping things shipshape requires the full cooperation of the officers, members and employees. We got that from the start and we're still getting it. We have the complete confidence of the board of governors and the house committees, and the full support, help and enthusiasm of Francis Zeray, our head golf professional; Frank Zakovsky, greens superintendent, and the entire staff.

"But please don't refer to this as the 'Miracle at Muttontown.' Anybody with imagination, given full support, can do what we've done here." •

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