

# Changing Lifestyles Hurting Country Clubs

**I**t's no state secret that golf is facing many dilemmas. Some of the problems are self-inflicted, and Lord knows you don't come to *Golfdom* to have me remind you of the obvious and depressing fact that our industry, like so many others, is struggling.

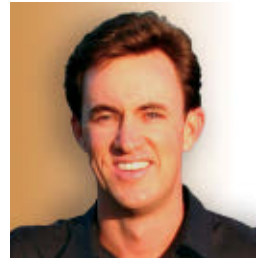
Yet what's always troubled me about the doom and gloom talk of golf's troubles is, you can drive by any public course on a nice day and see people waiting in line to tee off, both on the course and at the range. And despite our high unemployment rate and dire economy, you can stop into any golf superstore and find people of all shapes and sizes browsing the latest gear. Furthermore, considering the economic calamity brought on by Wall Street's crap-shooting ways, rounds of golf played should have actually plummeted more than they have. Shoot, even the PGA Tour's ratings are up this year, thanks to record-low TV ratings last year and a new crop of talented up-and-comers that engages fans.

Golf is not going anywhere. Yet I'm afraid there's a deeper, darker undercurrent that has not been addressed in the debate about our sport's future. It's what no one wants to say for fear of questioning the wisdom of our form of capitalism and because it's an issue we can't control: the American middle class is dying, and as many country clubs will tell you, the upper middle class is fast becoming a relic too.

It's important that the golf industry keeps this in mind when it analyzes how to reinvigorate both the game and

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BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



memberships. Plus, it's been too long since I've seen an inbox full of hate mail for brushing up against what some consider a delicate and debatable social issue that dares to question whether "market forces" are the answer to every dilemma known to man.

The anecdotal evidence of the income divide grows stronger by the day, as the country club world continues to adapt to modern demands such as lower prices, lax dress codes, Pilates classes and more. And yet, we keep watching country clubs fold, convert to semi-private courses or offer virtual giveaways just to keep their doors open. Even many of the nation's elite clubs, with their top 100 courses and much-ballyhooed facilities, are finding that the next generation simply can't write the check no matter how much they'd love to join an exclusive club at the current bargain bin prices.

Country clubs' struggles are typically blamed on today's way of life, a way of life in which dad no longer whiles away the hours at the club. And there is the widespread belief that the recreational desires of young families differ now in an age where women, who have long

been afterthoughts at many country clubs, are now the decision makers in a household and are finally getting to exact revenge for years of discriminatory practices. I used to subscribe to all of the reasons country clubs were dying, and I still do.

Yet we know that country-clubs-for-a-day never really caught on even as they catered to the modern mindset. Yes, many were overbuilt or constructed in remote locations that were difficult for people to get to. But ultimately, no matter how clubs try to reinvigorate play and increase their memberships, the "member inventory" shortage we are seeing is the result of too many people being unable to justify spending money on non-essentials such as recreation. Breaking down the current golf model to create a new one will not work until we see our middle classes have what used to be a no-brainer: the extra money to enjoy whapping a little white ball around every now and then.

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