



DEALING WITH MEMBERS

Ray Burniston discusses how best to deal with the membership.

Secretary At Work: March 2001 *(reviewed October 2011)*

Probably one of the most difficult things to do for the newly appointed secretary is getting it right in his/her dealing with members. During the past ten years or so, I have it said to me on a number of occasions by Captains, Chairman and Golf Officials, "So & so appears to be an efficient secretary and the administration is carried out correctly, but he does not seem to like or get on with members". It is often impossible to spotlight the exact reasons but at the end of the day the club will part company with the individual because of this problem. It often comes about because the individual in their previous career have not had to deal directly with the public at large but purely with their employees.

Most club members give little or no trouble to the secretary and club staff. From time to time they may get upset because the course is closed or they arrive to find a large society queuing up to tee off. But that is usually a one off and soon forgotten. What perhaps is far more difficult for the secretary is the member who sets out from day one to make the secretary's life intolerable. In some cases the secretary brings part of it on himself by perhaps not trying to avoid being wound up by a member and treats that person in a rather officious manner.

In that delightful book by G C Nash, "Letters to a Golf Club Secretary", there is a famous one written by one of the characters in the book to the newly appointed secretary which reaches him before he takes up his actual appointment. This not only suggests that the committee has made a bad decision in appointing him but also encloses a list of complaints and items for the secretary's attention even before he starts work at the club. I have to add that over the past few years I have not yet come across this actually happening. But who knows!

How can the newly appointed secretary avoid falling into this trap? It is fair to say that the first few weeks of your appointment will decide your future. There was the case of a new incumbent some years ago who arrived to take up his appointment the Saturday/ Sunday before he started on the following Monday. He was invited to a social function on the Saturday night and had to be carried out of the clubhouse at the close. That was taking 'getting to know your members' a little too far and needless to say he only survived a couple of weeks.

A lot can depend on what time of year you start. If you start in winter at a bleak time you will have little chance to meet members but at the same time little to upset them. If you start in the summer months then this gives you a great opportunity especially if you are living away from home to meet members and for them to get to know you. Sensible use of the facilities of the

clubhouse can help you in finding out what makes the club tick. You will quickly discover the regulars and also the ones who are prone to moan. Beware of getting caught up in the different cliques that are present in every golf club. They may welcome you into their fold because at the end of the day they feel you will grant them favours. The secret is to appear to be sociable without getting too involved. Also never forget that you are a servant of the club and members will expect you to supply them with a handicap certificate or suchlike even if you are having a quiet drink in the bar.

At long last many clubs have started to spend money on decent size offices for the secretary and staff. In many cases this will often mean the secretary being located in an inner office with staff to shield him from the members. This is fine at busy times or when you are holding meetings or interviewing but try to leave your office from time to time to meet members and visitors. Nothing sounds worse than to hear members complain that they have never seen the new secretary even though he has been in office for a couple of years.

Although it is no bad thing to let the members or someone else administer the club competitions there is no quicker way of getting to know members than being in control on busy days such as Invitation and Captain's Day. In most cases the secretary would expect to be on duty for things such as the Club Championship if only to oversee the day and be around should any disputes arise. The same should arise for major events held by outside organisations especially those administered by R&A, Home Unions or your County. If you as the newly appointed secretary have such a tournament at your club then remember your presence behind the scenes is essential to support your staff and help out in any emergencies.

However at the end of the day, it is how you deal with the difficult member which can make or break you. Try to avoid being involved in arguments with them. If possible try to see their point of view even if you do not agree. Never belittle them in front of their fellow members because this way you will make any enemy for life. Be careful of jumping in with both feet if somebody tells you all sorts of things are happening on the course or in the clubhouse. Always establish the facts and speak to all the parties concerned. Try to gain the confidence of your members. This can invariably be achieved by them realising that you are firm but fair and that you have sufficient knowledge of the game of golf to advise them.

I firmly believe in this day and age that every secretary should have a good working knowledge of the rules of golf and also of the handicapping systems. Having this breeds confidence within the membership.

The Golf Club Secretary today needs experience in many fields; administration, accounts & finance, computers, legal and other disciplines. All these essentials will count for little if at the end of the day you cannot deal with the club member.

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