



MEMBERS ASSOCIATION WITHIN A PROPRIETARY CLUB

Ian Dair, Chairman of the Toft Hotel Golf Club Members Association, describes the process of setting up a member's association at a proprietary club.

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The New Kind of Golf Club

There are, as of last year's count, 1,827 golf clubs in England with 694,000 members - a phenomenal rise from the 1,200 or so there were 10 years ago. An even more startling figure is that one third of clubs are proprietor-owned or municipal. However the most startling statistic of all is that about 90% of new clubs are proprietary.

This means that almost every new club has to establish the right relationship between the owner and the members - they are no longer one and the same. The owner runs and manages the course as his investment. The members are his customers, who look for a good course to play on but also want and expect the other things that go with golf -handicaps, teams, competitions, social events. In all the cases I know of, the membership have taken this on board by forming an organisation to deliver the playing and social side, under a constitution that enables them to work (and raise money) on behalf of the membership. And, again in most cases, the owner has welcomed this because without such effort the course will not be recognised by the official golfing bodies, or become a part of the local golf scene with a visiting clientele.

Advice on how to go about setting up a members' committee at a proprietary club is available from the English Golf Union. This article tells how I and fellow members at my club did this nine years ago and what we have learned as we've gone along.

The first, and maybe the only, point I want to make is that whilst a good written constitution is needed, many other things have to be in place to make the club tick. These tend to be less tangible but in a way much more important.

They come under these headings:-

Atmosphere

New clubs have the opportunity to set their own standards. It's not my place to criticise the older members clubs, but I have noticed that people who join new clubs seem to want something less formal. Many members haven't been part of a club before and they don't expect some of the traditions of golf clubs, which strike them as quaint or, less charitably daft.

For example, jacket and tie in the clubhouse after 7 p.m. Yes, they accept wholeheartedly dress standards on the course and respectable attire in the clubhouse. But why, they argue, should a friendly sports and social club suddenly switch to what seems to be a stuffy regime of collar, tie and jacket on a warm summer evening? On similar lines about breaking tradition, I am pleased to observe, both at my club and at another with which I am associated, that the divisions between men's and ladies' golf is being broken down. This goes so far, at one of my clubs, as the Seniors Section being open to men and women of the required age and fielding a team of men and women for the Seniors matches. If the opposing club queries this, then we don't play them because we believe that this is how we want to do things.

Communication

This is essential when a new group of people are coming together, and just as important as the club develops. We issue a club magazine twice a year, along with the usual notices (which we try to keep friendly with liberal use of "please").

The Spring edition introduces the new Captain and Lady Captain, the year's Committee and gives news of significant decisions or events. The Autumn edition contains all the results of competitions during the summer, how the teams have done and so on. We also list those who've achieved a hole-in-one and any odd or funny happening of the golfing year - for example, the Senior who lost control of his electric trolley which finished up in the lake at the bottom of the hill. The Senior didn't mind - he'd gone in up to his waist and fished it out!

The magazine is 8 pages properly bound and printed at a cost of around £400 for the two issues, or about 20% of our annual income. This is a high proportion for one item - communication has its price but is, we think, worth it.

Relationships

I've mentioned already how members set some of the relationships themselves. Others have to be designed. Our Committee is keen to be efficient and effective and we are conscious always that we serve for the benefit of members, not ourselves. We also must have a realistic view of our limitations as set by the fact of being part of a proprietary club. We call this credo "What the Committee is and isn't"-

"The Committee is:

- ✎ to serve members and make their golf enjoyable, specifically, to organise golfing and social events and administer handicaps; to represent Association members' views in the world of golf eg Lincs Union, EGU; to liaise with course management over issues of interest to members
- ✎ mutually supportive of each other:
corporate - once the Committee makes a decision it is the decision of us all and we're each responsible for it listening and open; we are open to members' views throughout the year (not just at the AGM) and our proceedings and decisions will be made known to members.

The Committee isn't:

- ✂ a talking or moaning shop
- ✂ a place to play games or try out power politics
- ✂ where all the decisions have to be made
- ✂ a decision point on course management.”

This last point leads me to relationships with the owner. Each owner will be different. Some will view the members committee as essential and to be actively encouraged; others will be suspicious, even hostile, if the committee tries to be a militant trade union for its members. It comes down to treating the owner with the respect due to him - without the owner having risked his capital there would be no course and no committee. And we must show we realise that managing a course too requires investment, that our wishes or demands for new rakes, bigger tees and so on all involve the owner in cost.

Equally, an owner will be very aware that competitions for members now exist and he has to look upon his members and visitors as customers with choice. We meet our owner twice a year to hear his plans and put forward our thoughts about how the club is coming along. One little point, probably not peculiar to our owner, is that such meetings are best arranged before or after lambing!

More day to day is the relationship with the Pro. He sees everyone and hears everything and is a valuable source of information on what members are feeling. He will act as such if the right bond of trust is built up. He is also the course manager as far as dress, etiquette and slow play are concerned and the Committee can usefully bend his ear on these matters - again, if we treat him with respect and show that we are sensitive to his relationship with players as customers.

Finance

This is much simpler for the Committee of a proprietary club. We have no responsibility for course or clubhouse upkeep and worries about bar profits are the owner's. Our worries are confined to bar prices! Through the Association membership fee of £5 a year, social events and sponsorship we raise what money we need to administer the Association, its teams, prizes, affiliation fees and so on with a bit left over for items which we think are for us eg computer equipment for the Handicap Secretary, coaching fees for juniors. A sometimes difficult line has to be drawn between what is appropriate for us and what is for the course owner. We tend to say that anything which a golf club member would normally expect from a course is the owner's responsibility; anything which adds to a member's enjoyment above this is for us eg a practice net.

I hope that we have done things right up to now. But we haven't left this to guesswork. A questionnaire went last year to all members asking them what they thought about how we run handicaps, teams, the social side and competitions, ending up with the \$64,000 question. I'm glad to say the Committee's work got a clean bill of health. Of the 153 questionnaires that came back, 139 people were satisfied with the job the Committee was doing on their behalf and only two weren't. Phew!

I fully acknowledge that people at other proprietary clubs may be doing things better or differently. I hope this article will provoke them to say “That sounds alright but have you thought of this way of doing things?” or “I’ve a particular problem, how did you deal with it?”

I’m sure that Golf Club Management will act as an information exchange, through its correspondence column, so we all become more effective at managing this relatively new situation of a members association within the proprietary club.

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