



FUTURE TYPES OF CLUBS

Brian Cooke, the recently retired secretary at Robin Hood GC, believes that the future of golf establishments in Britain lies in the amalgamation of the best elements of private, public and proprietary-owned clubs.

Secretary At Work: August 1998 *(reviewed August 2011)*

Having now endured 4 months as a former Secretary, my rehabilitation back into normal life is proceeding well. I have complete freedom from the joys of weekly committee meetings, a scarcity of interruptions, no excuse for not getting things done, and even some spare time for self-indulgences such as playing golf and enjoying a pint at my local - just like the boring old days when I had a real job in the IT industry! It also means that I get to spend more time with normal people (ie non-golfers) who invariably cannot resist the temptation to berate me with their perceptions of the game and use them to justify their having not taken it up.

Seriously though, the perception of golf by the man on the Clapham omnibus is a bit unhealthy. The most common adjectives employed are:

- ✂ elitist,
- ✂ expensive,
- ✂ sexist,
- ✂ undemocratic,
- ✂ geriatric.

Although only partially true, they are perceptions that should be addressed.

The Perception of Golf

Golf is perceived as elitist mainly because it is also perceived as expensive; sexist because it is also perceived as undemocratic (in terms of voting rights and weekend play); geriatric because so many clubs are beginning to resemble retirement homes during the week (and because the average age of memberships has risen by almost 1 year per year for quite a long time now). It is also perceived as elitist because of the infamous waiting list, the prohibitive entrance fee and the vicious circle of needing a handicap to join a club and vice versa - all fairly necessary evils at members' clubs but, nevertheless, major obstacles for the prospective new member.

At traditional private members' clubs, there is little incentive to change our ways to improve our image - unless, of course, lottery funding is ever required.

Of the newer clubs, perceptions are marginally less severe - but this could change as their members' expectations develop along the same lines as those at private members' clubs. Unfortunately, most of the newer clubs also have to service large debts and to produce a profit; which results in minimal impact on the game's main perception, that of expense and this seems to be the toughest to address. It also highlights an interesting cost anomaly - given that the average pay-&-play price per round is probably more than £10, that for the private member playing twice a week is around £5 (which really ought to be the target for everyone).

Now we can all read that in the early days of the game, an architect/professional would be invited to lay out a course (which he did by marking each tee and green with a peg), a groundsman would be instructed to cut the grass, play would commence and at some stage a modest pavilion would be built.

Three factors have caused us to move on from these modest beginnings:-

- ✂ player numbers;
- ✂ expectations;
- ✂ legislation.

Each had a huge effect on expenses. At many clubs, however, they have had a greater impact than they should have been allowed to. Looking at a selection of club accounts, business plans and working practices, one can witness:

- ✂ extravagant course construction costs;
- ✂ high course maintenance costs;
- ✂ rocketing clubhouse overheads, caused mainly by over-ambitious expectations and weak management structures.

At most clubs, the clubhouse overhead (even after allowing for catering, bar and fruit machine profit) ranges from a modest £10k to an exorbitant £40k per annum - what pub or restaurant could survive if run along clubhouse lines? The cost of an equipment shed for a golf club can be twice that of an equivalent farm building. Strict life-time control of costs, from planning a course through construction into operation and maintenance, could dramatically reduce the cost per round at most courses (possibly by as much as 50%, making the £5 round a reality for all).

The cost of entry into the game is also perceived to be prohibitive, unnecessarily. Expectations, fuelled by publicity and advertising, based on the professional game, leave the impression that 14 clubs, designer bag, umbrella, waterproofs, shoes and accessories are required minima. Practically, 6 clubs, small bag and a few accessories for £50 are sufficient, with a few group lessons for £10 (absolutely essential).

So what's the answer?

New courses developed to *A LOWER COST ALL-ROUND SPECIFICATION BASED ON MODEST EXPECTATIONS & QUALITY* comprising:

- ✂ £60 entry cost for new players (incl. lessons)
- ✂ average £5 per round charge
- ✂ aimed at beginners, families and juniors

- ✂ better design of membership categories and rights
- ✂ general relaxation of rules and byelaws
- ✂ shorter lead times to opening of courses (1 month for beginners, 6 months for others)
- ✂ reduced design & build costs based on more modest course specification
- ✂ stronger over-all control of costs
- ✂ modern organisation through separation of asset management from facility utilisation
- ✂ contracting out of clubhouse, course management and administration services
- ✂ fully democratic constitution
- ✂ initial funding via grants, loans and sponsorship from lottery, major suppliers, local companies, EU & golfing bodies.

Opportunities for development

In country areas, both the farming and licenced trades are currently in crisis. A **partnership** of a minimum of a farmer, adjacent publican, newly-formed golf club (club-registered, as usual) and club management company provides the full mix of skills and facilities required to develop and operate such a club. Under contract, the farmer provides land and all but the most specialist construction services and maintenance. A publican (or equivalent), on adapting his premises for a changing room facility and larger car park, provides all those hospitality services required of a basic clubhouse.

The golf club operates with officers and a committee to control competitive play and the social aspects of the game. A club management company provides centralised administration and marketing services to a number of similar clubs in a region.

Other sports and games could be provided, according to demand and the availability of land and buildings. Partnerships could involve more than one farmer, publican, etc, depending on the geography of their properties. A Links Trust (similar to that at St. Andrews) may be appropriate where councils are involved and they require an influence on the development and operation of their properties.

Conclusion

In other words, a new generation of facility is required; combining the best elements of public, pay-&-play and private members clubs; professionally run to satisfy modest expectations by competent leaders; capable of serving everyone in communities of every demographic description; helped into existence by lottery and corporate funding - possibly described as **PUBLIC MEMBERS' CLUBS?**

Interestingly, this concept is very attractive to those *normal people* who I have spent more of my time with recently. Unless public spending on municipal courses can be encouraged (which might still be the best way forward) then, perhaps, the above may help us to drive ahead again.

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