



THE RISE OF THE 'GROOVY GANG' - PART 1

Mark Vanner writes about recruiting junior members.

Secretary At Work: Reviewed February 2012

In 1998 when I became a Secretary, there was already a worrying decline in membership throughout golf clubs nation-wide. New members were getting harder to recruit and the membership was getting older. Such schemes of 2-for-1 meant people would play various courses throughout the year rather than join a club. A major area of concern is for juniors on how to get them and how to keep them, as they are the future of the game. Sporting icon Tiger Woods has undoubtedly brought golf to the attention of many youngsters. Unfortunately, there is fierce competition not just for the kids themselves, but their parents' hard earned money. Today the trend is still the same, but at Shifnal we may have begun to change that trend.

My career in golf club management began with my appointment at a new proprietary club. It was a very forward thinking, modern club and had a strong group of juniors. Though not large in numbers, only around 30, they were all active players.

I moved to Shifnal Golf Club, a traditional Private Members Club in Shropshire, with 750 members. It is well respected in the Midlands area and against the national trend it had a seven-year waiting list for gentlemen, the envy of many local clubs.

Like many golf clubs it has an ageing membership but until I looked into the membership I did not realise the extent of the problem. When I collated a report on the age profile of the club, to my amazement, at only 39 years old, there were only 41 members of all categories of both sexes, younger than me. The junior section was very small for the size of club. It did not take a lot of working out that the question of junior membership was a problem and, for the benefit of the club, the problem would have to be addressed positively if we were to change things round.

At my second management meeting, the Junior Organiser announced he would be stepping down after 10 years and a volunteer was asked for. The position of Junior Organiser was not exactly popular! After a few moments of silence, a volunteer stepped forward, a man in his sixties, maybe not the most obvious choice, but more importantly a willing volunteer.

A co-ordinated plan from the Club was needed, not just one person. Through the efforts of Mr 'Smith', our new 'enthusiastic' Junior Organiser and the Treasurer, with the backing of the General Committee and myself, a plan was put into place, a plan that would change the way of the Club. The question of how to encourage more juniors and how to make changes was discussed and it was recognised the historic and current junior activities and policies, which we had followed over the

past number of years, would not and were not working to achieve our aims. No one could fault the efforts of the previous Junior Organisers, but as a Club we would need a co-ordinated plan to achieve our objectives. A strong junior section whereby we promoted golf to all standards of youngsters, helping them to improve, and enjoy the game. It would not be a one-off policy; it had to be ongoing and needed the support of all Committee members and members to achieve our aims.

The areas to be addressed were:

1. Fees
2. Recruitment
3. Retention

If we were to help the juniors to be Shifnal's future, then all three had to be addressed and acted upon.

1. Fees

The current system was for a junior to pay a joining fee and then his/her annual subscription, which was around £150 per year. Though the amount was by no means out-of-line with all other Clubs, juniors were not queuing to join. There was also a Joining Fee, equivalent to the first year's subscription payable on entry to the Club.

The Treasurer of the day met with the Junior Organiser and myself and came up with a radical review and proposition for junior membership fees.

His plan was:

- ✎ Joining fees would be abolished.
- ✎ The junior category would be split into three sections;
10 years and under,
11 - 16 years and
17-18 years.

Intermediate Membership would go from 18-21 years and Student Membership 21-26 years, if in full time education.

- ✎ The fees would be cut to
£26 for 10 years and under (50p per week),
£62 for 11 – 16 (£1 per week), and
£104 for 17 and 18 year olds.

The points outlined above were not rocket science, but for a traditional-run club, the prospect of cutting revenue was radical. The Committee, to their credit, backed the decision wholeheartedly and the subscription rates were introduced.

2. Recruitment

This was where the new Organiser was to show his enthusiasm and, when others in junior golf doubted him, he came through and put Shifnal Juniors on the map. He covered every source of information and funding available, contacting the England Golf, the Golf Foundation, the R&A and Regional and local authorities. Golf competes with a lot of other sports for the sportsmen/women of tomorrow so; therefore, Mr Smith had to get these youngsters introduced to golf. His plan was to get the local schools involved and invite them to send children for a free golf lesson.

Even offering discounted lessons to schools would not be cheap, so we applied for a Lottery Grant to fund the project. The application pack arrived, a huge mound of paperwork, I was convinced the size of the application pack was to put clubs off applying. Mr Smith and I filled in the document and, with fingers crossed, sent it away in September 2000. The Christmas present we hoped for came in the tune of a cheque for £3,400.

The granting of Lottery funding was the catalyst to the schools project. The money enabled us to invite more children than we had ever hoped. Mr Smith set out visiting schools, meeting headmasters and Physical Education teachers, inviting them to send pupils to the club to have three free lessons with our Professional on a Saturday/Sunday morning or after school. The local schools were only too willing to send pupils; some loved it, some hated it, but at least golf was getting a chance to introduce the game to these youngsters, a chance it may never have had. The money bought not only lessons, but also proper junior golf clubs for the children to use. The membership was asked to donate old clubs, bags, shoes and golf balls and they did; equipment was donated en masse. The Pro Shop cut down and re-gripped clubs at a reduced rate to help with costs. The generosity of the members meant that we were able to give youngsters bags, balls, etc., and this helped keep down the costs for their parents.

Within weeks of the scheme starting, application forms from juniors began to flow into the office. At a General Committee meeting, Mr Smith, was outlining how the scheme was progressing, I mentioned how the applications were coming in from his 'Groovy Gangers' and this is how the 'Groovy Gang' was born.

In the first six months our Junior Section had grown from 25 to 85. Inside a year we reached 100, a Club limit we never thought we would reach. We introduced an under 7 category, which freed up 15 spaces. Each year we lose youngsters to other sports, but early in 2004 we had 100 juniors; 15 under 7's (youngest is 4) and a waiting list of 12, who are not forgotten.

The scheme brought an added bonus, as the junior membership grew so did the revenue it brought to the club. To this end a number of the parents became Social Members and used the clubhouse facilities when their children were having a lesson or were attending Sunday Club.

Mark Vanner 2005

THE RISE OF THE 'GROOVY GANG' - PART 2

Mark Vanner writes about retaining junior members.

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3. Retention

It was all well and good getting these new youngsters, but to keep them and encourage them would be the key to the Groovy Gang's future. One major area the Club would have to address was the Member's attitude towards the juniors. As a former junior golfer, I can relate to the negative attitude of some members and officials towards juniors. Something I have always endeavoured to do, in my position as Secretary, is to be approachable for the juniors. I have two young children, one of whom is now a junior member and, therefore, I can relate to the younger generation.

We had to offer facilities so that they not only wanted to come to the club, but give an atmosphere to which their parents would want to bring them. Although we had good practice facilities ie nets and putting greens, the youngsters were desperate to play the game. The Club created a 3-hole course, out of one of the practice areas, where juniors would have priority. The holes were 80 to 90 yards long. We produced a scorecard and this enabled the youngster to feel that he or she was playing on a proper golf course.

The Sunday club was formed, where all junior members were welcome and parents were encouraged to come along. Sunday Club was from 3pm; youngsters used the practice facilities and the 3-hole course. For players of older ages or higher ability, they would be taken out on the course, with an adult, to learn and enjoy the game. Children who were on the waiting list or children who had contacted the club about playing the game were encouraged to come to Sunday Club to get a taste for the game, before thinking about becoming a member.

There were a few adult members who were upset that the Sunday Club had the first tee blocked off for two hours, from 4-6pm, but these were in the minority and the Committee stuck by their word and encouraged the juniors as much as possible.

It was quickly realised that a new junior could not be asked to turn out dressed like Tiger Woods in designer shoes and clothes. We did not want to put the youngsters off by enforcing a strict dress code, therefore, the dress code rules for the youngsters was relaxed to an extent so they could find their way. No jeans or football shirts were allowed, but trainers and plain T-shirts were permitted. To my pleasant surprise members seemed to agree with this policy and the juniors themselves soon began coming to Junior Club dressed like Tiger Woods and his professional colleagues. Parents were encouraged to join the Club as Social Members and understand the way the club ran.

Further Lottery money was a massive bonus and the next two years we received another £5000 towards the running of the section. Over this two-year period we put the money into continuing to offer schools the opportunity to send pupils for lessons. We now had a base to work from and in this

period offered lessons to junior members, who had recently joined, to encourage them to improve and enjoy the game.

We had to remember that we had juniors here before all these new faces arrived and it was important that the old junior members were not left out. In the second and third years of the scheme we, therefore, offered lessons to current members to encourage them to improve their golf and mix with the new members.

Competitions were played on the first or second Saturday morning of each month with tee times reserved exclusively for the juniors.

To encourage the juniors we improved the existing junior room having it nicely decorated. Gone were the old professional advertising posters of Arnold Palmer in his Slazenger jumper. It's now Woods, Rose and Monty on the walls. A television was put in along with comfortable chairs and a table tennis table to help encourage the use of the clubhouse.

The Junior Organisers introduced a Christmas party for the junior section, which continues to be well supported and is now a permanent fixture in the social diary.

With the three areas addressed, the Junior Section has a firm base to be built on. If anyone of these areas had not been done, the scheme would have failed.

So who is to get the credit for a scheme, which has proved such a success? I would love to say me; I have only added advice, encouragement and help when required. The Treasurer's foresight to cut fees and use an innovative system must be applauded.

The Clubs General Committee has played their part, encouraging the Junior Organiser not only to start up the project, but also to support him throughout. The Lottery funding was a real bonus and allowed us to put into the scheme far more than we ever envisaged. Even so when the money stopped, the Committee continued to give the money for equipment and lessons.

The Committee, the Treasurer and myself can all be pleased with our contribution, but the person who must take the major credit is the person who has put the hard hours in, the Junior's Organiser, Mr Smith.

It was all well and good sitting around a Committee table wanting a large junior membership, but it fell on Mr Smith's shoulders to give the Club that. He accepted the role with little knowledge of junior golf, but he put in many hours to understand what was required. He contacted many organisations he thought could help; he attended regional and county meetings to help reach his aim. He recruited two regular helpers and their efforts cannot be underestimated. Turning up every Sunday, come rain or shine, is a commitment, which they have never taken lightly, especially as none of the three had sons or daughters playing. One of the helpers, a lady, has encouraged a large number of girls to take up the game and her enthusiasm and hard work is to be applauded.

It is very nice to go to a Secretaries' meeting and get good comments from colleagues, near and far, who have heard about our efforts. This indicates to me that we achieved something to be rightly proud of.

The future looks a lot brighter than in 1998, though we cannot stand back and admire what we have achieved we have to continue to support and encourage these juniors. Though our numbers will fluctuate from year to year we have to consolidate our position. We have to continue to not only encourage the youngsters, but the Junior Organiser's team of volunteers to continue their work.

For the future we will continue to strive for improvement. Added to our continuing present policy of lessons and Sunday club, we will be trying to gain our 'Golf Mark' award and we will be looking to publish a Junior Handbook for every junior member. We are also working closely with the ELGA representatives to formulate an efficient Child Protection Document so that parents can have confidence that their children will be correctly looked after. We are investigating the possibility of putting a designated junior page on our web site.

Today's 'Groovy Gang' will, hopefully, become our adult members of the future and the friendships formed today will stay with them as they grow up with the wonderful game of golf.

Mark Vanner 2005 - previous secretary of Shifnal Golf Club

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Children in Golf (CiG)

The **Children in Golf** workshops (see: <http://www.childreningolf.org/workshops>) are aimed at Golf Professionals, Junior Organisers, Girls' Junior Organisers, Volunteers and Club Secretaries/Managers, or contact your Home Union Representative for details of the next course in your area.

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