

Golf can't rest on lockdown laurels

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Exclusive
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BACK in March, when the coronavirus lockdown kicked in and you were only allowed to stick your head out of the window for a quick gulp of air before returning to your cellar, the suspension of golf was a particularly sore one to stomach. For subscription paying members at clubs across the land, the sight of pristine courses being used by the pesky public for such recreational and clandestine pursuits as family picnics, bike runs, football kickabouts and occasional vandalism added to the harrumphing belly-aching in the golfing fraternity. Prior to the onset of Covid-19, plenty of clubs were eking out the kind of hand to mouth existence that would've made Oliver Twist look like Warren Buffett.

But, when golf was given the go ahead again, while other leisure activities remained on the no-no list, memberships enjoyed a timely tonic amid the ravages of the pandemic. "Going into Covid, some clubs were clinging on by their fingertips and thinking 'this could finally put us out of business'," said Kevin Fish, a leading authority on golf club leadership and development who performs regular surveys and analysis on the general state of the UK industry.

"Eight months on, it has actually given many a shot in the arm. For the last 20 years clubs have typically lost six per cent of their members. This March, a lot of clubs were still collecting subscriptions and there was a genuine fear that resignations would hit 11 per cent and beyond. There was understandable concern. "But look what happened? When golf opened up, and other sports remained prohibited, suddenly all those people who were thinking twice about their memberships were scurrying to get it back. With such pressure on the tee, lockdown showed that if you wanted to be sure of a game of golf, you'd better become a member.

"Clubs got a new wave of people knocking on the door. By July the average number was somewhere between 40 and 50 new members." Fish, a former club manager and development expert with Scottish Golf, admits the situation is still "volatile" and added: "Those clubs who rely on the hugely lucrative overseas visitor market have suffered the most, with some looking at a seven-figure gap in their budget." With clubhouses working to restricted measures, it's also been difficult to showcase the full benefits of a membership. "It's hard to create



Some Scottish courses have benefitted from the suitability of golf to social distancing, according to Kevin Fish (inset), a leading authority on golf club leadership.



“Clubs got a new wave

a feeling of belonging in a club right now as members are only using the green grass, not the other social areas," said Fish.

"But the crisis has also woken up long-term golfers to embrace their roles as custodians of their clubs for future generations, not just fee-paying customers like a local gym." Amid the tumult of uncertainty that the pandemic has whipped up, many clubs have been given a fresh outlook.

"Golf needs to be carefully put in perspective with the crisis overall, but the lockdown has generally benefited the industry at club level," Fish continued. "Club managers have reported a greater willingness for clubs to redefine themselves, whether brought on by an influx of younger members or in other cases a relaxation of the playing rules which have also helped speed up play. "Everyone has had a chance to have a really close look at their club and how it's been run and they are now willing to consider taking advice to ensure their club will still be around for the next generation."

Of course, there is no room for complacency. Instead of following up a metaphorical birdie putt on the seventh green with a crippling shank off the eighth tee, clubs have to find a way to consolidate and build on this new-found momentum.

That will be easier said than done as the grisly social and economic impacts of the coronavirus continue to flock home to roost.

"The key is for clubs to make sure that members care so much about their membership of the local golf club that they simply cannot live without it," said Fish. Very few people will cancel their broadband in this recession, because we can't live without it. But can clubs do enough to persuade the new wave of golfers that they can't live without their golf membership?"