

Pastime of the pandemic sent into a tailspin

Clubs back to fighting for survival after boom experienced during lockdown

Exclusive
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Published:
Monday, 17th April 2023

EVERY cloud has a silver lining. In those dark days of Covid, when all sorts of activities were placed under house arrest, the rush of people towards golf was akin to the scenes you would see in a nature documentary when a Wildebeest gets spooked by a lurking lion and the entire herd goes on a thunderous stampede.

In this great surge of interest, the Royal & Ancient game got a welcome shot in the arm. Tee-time sheets were overflowing with bookings and membership figures rocketed like something launched from Cape Canaveral as all and sundry found physical and mental sanctuary on the fairways amid the stifling restrictions. Golf became the pastime of the pandemic.

For many clubs, it was boom-time. But, a couple of years on, are we heading for the subsequent bust?

Well, statistics gathered together by Kevin Fish, that well-kent authority on golf club management who runs the North Berwick-based Contemporary Club Leadership, suggest that membership resignation rates could be returning to pre-Covid levels.

"April is a big month for golf," said Fish of that annual enthusiasm that bursts out like the spring daffies.

"The Masters always energises people to dust off the clubs again, but

for the boards of our many private members golf clubs it is also the month when they find out how many of their members have decided to renew their vows for another year.

"We regularly survey club leaders and our most recent findings show that the average resignation rate is six per cent. This is back to the level golf was experiencing before the pandemic struck. While it is not the mass exodus many feared this year, it is still a return to the familiar slippery slope golf has been on since the turn of the century.

"Golf has been one of the most volatile industries during the lockdown years. The much-needed government intervention of furlough payments placed many struggling clubs into the recovery position, until the unexpected boom arrived.

"For three years, golf clubs have never been busier, but the easing of lockdown coupled with the severe economic challenges of recent months has sent club boards into a tailspin wondering what increase in subscription fees could be charged this year. We have never seen more volatility in member subscription rates, with the increases ranging from zero right up to 25 per cent."

Fish, a former club development manager with the amateur governing body, Scottish Golf, is now intrigued to see what will happen next. Has golf done enough to capitalise on the



Above: Kevin Fish CCM, Director, Contemporary Club Leadership Ltd

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influx of newcomers while retaining those who are giving the game another chance?

"We know that marrying golfers to a club is easier when they are in their 40 and 50s," he added. "That age group is now also more likely to be working from home, or even part of the mass resignation wave we have learned about. That is the target rich environment I would focus a club's attention on while trying to provide such a level of belonging, that members genuinely feel the same way towards their golf club that they feel about their broadband – they simply couldn't live without it."

Amid the widespread ravages of Covid, the unlikely fillip golf was afforded made members appreciate what they have in the club environment. They are custodians of something that should be cherished, after all.

The question Fish now asks is this. "Is the decline we have seen since the year 2000 terminal, or has lockdown done enough to shock clubs in to running their affairs in a more business-like manner?" he said.

"Our latest survey reveals that almost one third of clubs are concerned about their long-term future, beyond 2028.

"Our data also shows that the gap between the large and small clubs is getting bigger, as evidenced by resignation rates, subscription revenue and, this year in particular, the levels of salary increases given to secure the best staff.

"I would say that the old adage about clubs being 'not for profit' is gradually being consigned to the dustbin.

"Whether it is building a reserve to see them through the next unforeseen calamity, or simply replacing the assets they are responsible for, when members embrace the fact that they are owners of their clubs not customers, they are more likely to succeed and thrive while making their club attractive to the next generation, not just the last."

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