Top clubs ride crest of a wave while less exalted go the wall

PICTURE: STUART FRANKLIN/GETTY

St Andrews, main, and Donald Trump's Turnberry, right, are among a number of top clubs to have hiked green fees, while Hirsel, left, has gone bust

Martyn McLaughlin

For the gilded few, it is a time of unprecedented demand, with tourists from the US more eager than ever to test their game in some of the finest courses the home of golf has to offer. For others, however, it is a precarious existence, with well-regarded local clubs going to the wall.

Such is the duality of the golf business in Scotland in 2025. On the one hand, a coterie of renowned clubs ride the wave of the post-pandemic recovery; on the other, less-exalted courses are feeling the pinch of declining membership rolls and rising costs.

153%
...increase in peak green fees at Turnberry's famous Ailsa course

The impact of this is a major disruption in the sport's business model. A rapid spike in green fees – the charges levied for visitors wishing to play a round – is becoming an increasingly important revenue stream.

Indeed, Scorecard: The Business of Golf, The Scotsman's week-long series scrutinising the finances underpinning the sport in Scotland, can reveal that across 30 of the nation's best-known courses, green fees have increased by an average of 67 per cent over the past five years.

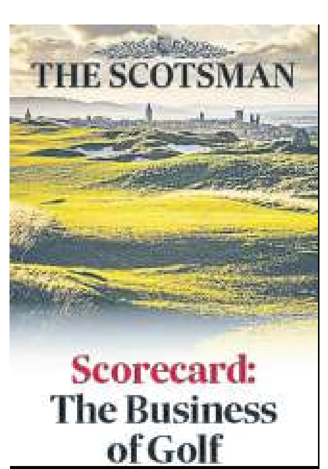
But there are growing concerns about the prevalence of such a business model, and its impact on domestic golfers in Scotland.

David Jones, better known as UK Golf Guy, has gained online prominence thanks to his reviews of courses around the world, and organises golf trips in Scotland and further afield. He said that while the Asian market had yet to fully recover after the pandemic, with the "top-end" courses deemed too expensive for many European visitors, tourists from stateside cannot get enough.

"If you're an inbound American golfer, there's probably around a dozen to 15 courses you have on your radar," he said. "These keep lifting up their green fees, partly to meet rising costs, but also because the demand is constantly outstripping supply, especially at private members' clubs.

"If you look at the likes of Muirfield, Royal Troon, Royal Aberdeen and North Berwick, there's been a shift between the proportion of revenue that comes from members, and the proportion from green fees."

For years, Mr Jones has documented the spike in fees across some of the nation's most popular courses. Drawing on the data he has compiled between 2020 and 2024, and the most recent green fees for 2025 published on club websites, The Scotsman's series can detail some notable examples.



The single biggest increase by far has come at Donald's Trump's Turnberry resort, where peak green fees at its famous Ailsa course shot up from £395 in 2020 to £1,000 this summer for non-residents, an increase of 153 per cent.

At Gleneagles, the peak summer cost of a round on the Kings course has gone from £140 to £330 over the past five years – a rise of 135 per cent – while the peak-period fees at the Duke's course at St Andrews have risen from £100 to £220, a 120 per cent jump.

After Turnberry, the most expensive courses for peak green fees are: Trump International in Aberdeenshire (£495 this summer, up from £295 in 2020); Kingsbarns (£448, up from £312); Muirfield (up from £270 to £365); Royal Troon (also £365, having stood at £260 five years ago); and the Old Course at St Andrews (where the price has risen from £195 to £340).

Some in the sector, such as Chris Spencer, secretary of the Club Management Association of Europe Scotland, claim the rising green fees have wrongly become a barometer of a course's quality. "A lot of the proprietary and championship courses are in a different stratosphere, and they can charge £300, because that's what the North American market expects – if it's less than that, they'll think the course in question is poor, which is absolutely shocking," he said.

Although the ongoing demand means that such fees are being paid, Mr Jones said some Scottish clubs were "nervous" about such increases. "There's one club where around 80 per cent of its revenue is coming through green fees, but if there's a change in the value of the pound against the dollar, suddenly those trips will be viewed as expensive," he said.

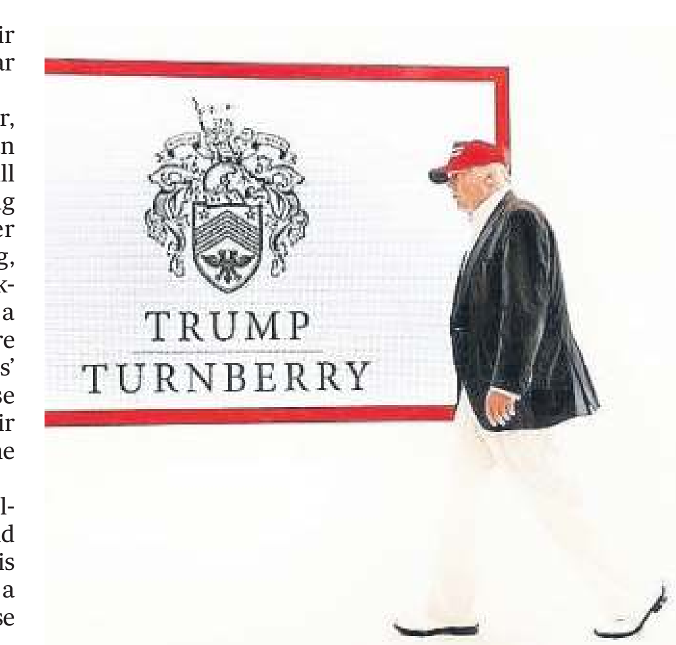
"It's worked for them in the short term. They've generated really strong revenues, their members aren't having large increases in subs and some secretaries think it's great. But others are worried that if things change, the whole model could become unsustainable."

Already, Mr Jones said, the shift is impacting local golfers. He said this winter, only eight or so of the top 25 courses in the UK allowed visitor play – traditionally a cheaper way for people to enjoy well-known courses – compared to 23 prior to the pandemic. "Some top-end clubs have so much money coming in via green fees that they are deciding to close during winter," he said. "Some of them are also reducing the number of hours visitors can play in the summer."

At the other end of the market, less well-known clubs are struggling. In the past six months, Hirsel in Coldstream and Torrance Park in Motherwell have closed. Earlier this month, West Dunbartonshire Council announced Dalmuir golf course could face a similar fate amid funding problems.

According to Mr Spencer, ongoing cost pressures mean it is likely that other clubs will also shut up shop in coming months. "I can see further municipal courses closing, because councils will be looking to save money, which is a great shame, and I think there will be other private members' clubs that will close because they're not able to cover their costs and generate income," he explained.

"There is still a lot of volatility in the market, and it would not surprise if by the end of this year, we have another half a dozen clubs who close because they can't afford it."



Comment

Kevin Fish

Visitor revenue poses 'lobster-pot' problem for golf

You don't find many golf club members who think the club should put subscriptions up any more than is absolutely necessary, which results in two things: first, the club struggles to generate enough profits to reinvest into the business, seeing a gradual decline in assets and the experience. This, secondly, ignites a hunger to cover costs from someone else, and the easy solution is visitor revenue.

Typically, a club will rely on this to generate 15 per cent to 20 per cent of gross profit. In our work with club managers and boards, rising costs are their No 1 concern, followed by a deeply-held belief that members won't tolerate the hike in subscriptions required to keep pace. So, annual price increases hit visitors much harder than members.

Clubs may say they are entitled to charge non-members whatever they want. But there comes a point when members need to act like business owners and fund more of their own costs. For clubs in the lower half of the industry, I'm reminded of Theresa May's phrase 'JAMs' – those just about managing – and I'm not sure that's a great business strategy.

In the upper tier, trophy courses have the luxury of turning on as much visitor revenue – often from overseas visitors - as they feel comfortable with. In this tier, members are frequently covering less than half of the clubs' operating costs. Relying on revenue from an external source to fund your model is risky – the most recent example was Covid when overseas golf travel stopped.

This high level of visitor revenue also brings other problems, including friction from members who feel clubs have become too 'corporate'. Clubs need to decide if they are private members clubs who welcome visitors, or golf destinations that tolerate members. And then prove it.

We work with smart clubs who are gradually dialling back on external revenue, which is the 'lobster-pot' problem – the lure of visitor income is easy to get into, but far harder to get out of. They have a strategy to manage this prosperity, get the balance right with members' support, and use it forimprovements, rather than to cover the monthly payroll.

In the 20 years before Covid, there was a 20 per cent reduction in people buying a golf club membership. In any other industry, we would have seen a significant market correction, but the willingness of club committees to carry on generating visitor revenue has allowed some to continue that may have otherwise closed. Will we see more closures this year in Scotland? We'll have a better idea in two weeks when our annual survey of clubs is complete, but early indications are that resignation levels in some tiers are again running at 6.5 per cent. That mirrors the worrying trajectory clubs we were on for the 20 years before Covid. There may be trouble ahead.

Kevin Fish is director of Contemporary Club Leadership, a training and consultancy business that advises UK golf clubs