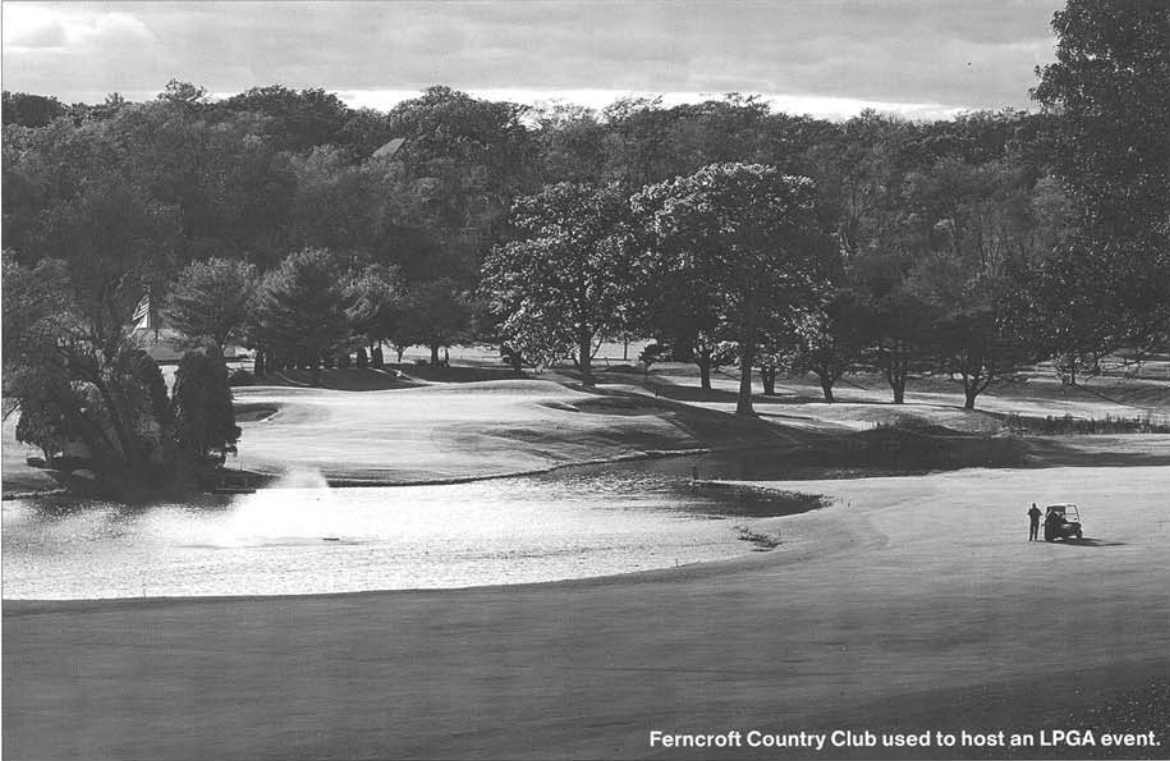


Fresh Start

An ownership change proved to be good news at Ferncroft

BY JOHN TORSIELLO



Ferncroft Country Club used to host an LPGA event.

The kitchen was in dire need of repair. The practice range needed to be lengthened. The golf superintendent was doing his job with mirrors. And the course itself demanded some tender loving care.

But the most important task facing Affinity Golf Management when it purchased Middleton's Ferncroft Country Club early last year didn't involve material, supplies, or labor. It was winning back the hearts and minds of the club's members, who had become disenchanted after years of what they perceived as neglect on the part of ownership.

"The feeling of the members was summarized by a member who was a leader of one of the Saturday morning groups," says Damon DeVito, Affinity's managing director. "He was a senior businessman with a big company. He told us that he wanted to believe us but that we

were facing a cycle of mistrust that we needed to break."

Affinity won members' trust back the old-fashioned way: They earned it. They did their homework, meeting face-to-face with about a dozen members to seek their opinions of what needed to be done to bring Ferncroft back to its former standing as one of the premier clubs in the north Boston area (the club hosted the LPGA Boston Five Classic from 1980 to 1990).

"We did our due diligence and had to concern ourselves with things we don't normally concern ourselves with when we take over a property," says DeVito. Affinity, a Virginia-based management company, has worked with clubs in 21 states. "We took over in February and met with the members to tell them of our plans. We didn't over promise and we hoped they would bet on us."

Under the previous owner, the nearby Sheraton Hotel, memberships were annual, so when Affinity took over at the start of the 2006 there were no active memberships. The new structure called for a mix of full and annual memberships.

Affinity was hoping to garner around 50 members within a one- or two-month time frame after that initial meeting. When 118 individuals signed up for full founding golf membership within a six-day period, DeVito was pleasantly stunned. Memberships reached around 300 by the end of the year.

"These people are betting on us and we want to wake up every morning and make them look like geniuses," he says.

One plus for prospective members was that whereas the hotel closed the course to members Monday and Thursday for outings, under the new regime it is closed only on Mondays. Also, it is no longer open to hotel guests. More important was the new owner's overall commitment.

Toby Ahern has been at Ferncroft, a Robert Trent Jones Sr. designed layout, for 16 years, first as an assistant, then as golf professional, and now as director of golf. He couldn't help but be a bit skeptical when he heard changes were in the air.

"The sale happened at a crucial time for Ferncroft, its members, and staff. There had been a great deal of mistrust on the part of members towards ownership because they had been promised things that weren't delivered," he says. "But the presentation by Affinity was very well thought out. The members were delighted when the sale happened on a Thursday and work crews arrived at 7 a.m. the next day. That really created a buzz. For myself, this is something I have wanted and looked forward to for a long time."

Affinity has thus far pumped about \$1 million into Ferncroft. There was an extensive redesign of the club's "19th Hole" facility, which now includes an updated restaurant function space and bar. A top-notch chef and food and beverage manager were hired.

Work also was done to the club's pool and extensive improvements were made to the course's drainage system. In addition, two holes of the club's nine-hole executive course were taken to lengthen the existing practice range, which will soon have a 40,000-square-foot grass tee line.

"We also needed to give superintendent Michael Cassidy the tools he needed to keep Ferncroft in top condition," says DeVito. "He had been patching things together and getting by with some old equipment and doing a great job."

DeVito says more work remains, especially in the area of locker room facilities. On the course, bunker work is next and perhaps a new green for number 16.

Few significant design changes are in store for the course at Ferncroft, a wonderful track that was the first collaboration between Jones Sr. and his then young son, Rees Jones, opening in 1969.

"I think Rees feels something special for Ferncroft," says DeVito. "We had senior designer Keith Evans from Rees Jones Inc. in to toss around some ideas about the course and he said Jones Sr.'s signature is all over the place. Technology has passed some older courses by, but that's not the case at Ferncroft. It holds up very well."

And what about those skeptical members?

"We have a great food and beverage operation where we almost had none and improvements have already been made to the course and elsewhere," says Ahern. "We went from over promised and under delivered to under promised and over delivered. The reaction from the members has been tremendous." ■

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