

Interview with Swanston's Director of Golf, Stewart Snedden

The new Swanston was born right into the start of the credit crunch. When you re-opened how big was your membership and how much has it grown since?

The club owned the course beforehand and the membership was around 200. Since Colin and I took it over we've taken it up to 960.

That's completely the opposite direction from many clubs over the same time. How do you explain this incredible growth?

Most of it is to do with offering a flexible membership. We did our homework and to see what the public and the golfers wanted. You've only got to look at the way the family is now to see how little time people have. The majority of parents both work and there are a large number of single parents.

We are finding that with the credit crunch people want to play golf but they don't want to play on the weekends when it's really expensive. So we are offering an alternative. Yes, we offer standard and family memberships for the people who can play most days. But for people who can only play certain days a week, or for golfers who are just starting out and don't want to commit to an annual membership, we have made golf as flexible as possible.

How does it work?

We look at the level of each golfer, the amount they are going to play and then suggest the best membership for them. We offer a number of memberships such as the Limited Play which gives you 20 rounds a year for £245. You can use it throughout the season, you can gain a handicap from it and you can play the competitions, or you can play them all in a week. Most spread it over the year, which works a treat.

Amongst our memberships we offer an Armed Forces (Dreghorn Barracks is on Swanston's doorstep) membership for £45 a month when they are based in Britain. When they are abroad they don't pay. We have also had pro rata memberships for the last three months which are working really well.

Do golfers who don't take memberships receive any member's benefits?

Yes, they get membership of the club. There are too many clubs out there that say you can play 20 rounds but are really just selling a visitors fee and you get nothing else, which I believe is false economy. Most courses have got what they call flexible memberships but they have levies and joining fees. Swanston has no annual levy or joining fee.

So how important are your golfers that take out annual memberships?

Our goal is to build a strong, loyal membership and offer facilities at the right price to keep golfers coming back year after year. The best deals and the focus of our investment will always be centred on those golfers that show an ongoing commitment to us by paying an annual membership fee.

This enables us to plan long-term and invest in the facilities with confidence.

The priority will always be given to members and their competitions. Full membership is less than £45 a month. I've compared our prices to other clubs and we are one of the most affordable in the Lothians for the facilities we have.

What about memberships for children?

We're running a business but we are golfers first and foremost, we have a long term plan and understand how important juniors are, so we keep the kids' prices down a lot. We have a Family membership; a Junior 1 and 2, for 8 to 13 year olds and 14 to 17 year olds; and a Youth membership for 18 to 21 year olds. If a 14 year old came in today (early October) for a membership we would offer them a Junior 2 membership at a pro rata rate of £39.58. That would take them up to next March.

At the moment we have 170 junior members but we are encouraging more and making sure that it costs next to nothing for them to join. There are lots of incentives for juniors, for instance if they make a certain handicap then we will give them free tuition and free golf attire to represent the club.

I know a lot of clubs frown on kids. But if you integrate them properly, teach them the etiquette, give them a games room and get them to play with the adults it works a treat.

What happened to the original club's committee?

We've kept the old club committee in place and we value their opinion. They are the hard core of the members that are left and they've got a lot of influence. Colin and I own the club and make the decisions but we tell them what we are going to do.

How successful has offering flexible memberships been?

You only have to look at our membership which has grown from 220 to 960 in the last three years to see it's been a massive success. It's working because people like the flexibility and they are taking it up more and more.

It sounds like you have some real marketing genius. How have you promoted yourselves?

I travelled to clubs everywhere to do my research and met directors of golf clubs to see how they did things.

We did a small amount of advertising in local magazines, some advertising on Garrison Radio, which was free, and some leaflet drops, but nothing on a massive scale. Word of mouth has done the rest. When you are here it doesn't feel like you're in a golf club, which is something we worked hard to achieve. The restaurant has really sold it and we're also open to the public.

Would a flexible membership work at other clubs?

Most definitely. My view is that clubs have to be more proactive and more open to change. You have to do your research, go out and ask people what they want from you so they are able to play golf.

How big can you grow your membership?

We have two courses and we have a standard scratch for both. Some courses that have a 9-hole short course don't have a standard scratch. I can turn ours into three sixes and you can go round three times. Our tee time management system is fantastic and between our two courses we can have 90 out playing in an hour. Tee times are at eight minute intervals so in theory the two courses could sustain the whole membership in a single day.

Any other innovations we should know about?

We have an online booking system that helps a lot. Once you become a member we give you a password and a log on and you can go in and book your own tee time.

What is your ultimate aim at Swanston?

For Colin and me it's a long term plan and our ultimate aim is to get Swanston on the map as a club which everyone knows as a centre of excellence, where you can send your kids and know they are being looked after, taught properly and enjoying themselves. Ultimately we want to produce another four or five of John Gallagher (2007 Scottish Amateur Champion whose home is Swanston).

For more information about Swanston Golf visit:

www.swanstongolf.co.uk