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WHIMSICALLY COMPARING MAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE



PRIVATE GOLF & COUNTRY CLUBS' FAMILY-CENTRIC RE-ENVISION

An interview with the President & CEO of the National Club Association Henry Wallmeyer

BY ROBIN JAY

Henry Wallmeyer at The University Club of Washington, DC

Photo by: Frank T. Smith Photography

The 1968 slogan ‘You’ve come a long way, baby’ didn’t originally refer to private golf and country clubs, but it’s certainly relevant to the industry today. A keyhole comparison of the origins of private gentlemen’s clubs in the 1800s in London and clubs in America now shines a compelling spotlight on why.

The Society Herald in 1888 described the typical day of a young bachelor. “He breakfasts, lunches, and sups at the club. He is always at billiards...he writes innumerable letters, shakes hands a dozen times a day, drinks coffee by the gallon and has a nod for everybody, lives, moves, and has his being within the club,” Amy Milne-Smith wrote in *The Journal of British Studies*.

EMERGENCE OF PRIVATE CLUBS IN AMERICA



A Club of Gentlemen by Joseph Highmore
c. 1730

In 1786, the first private golf club opened in the United States: The South Carolina Golf Club of Charleston, followed by the Savannah Golf Club in 1794. By the turn of the century, country clubs were regarded as ‘the very essence of American upper-class.’

But a century later, times are changing. For private clubs to thrive in a new generation, they’re redefining membership. Just ask industry expert Henry Wallmeyer, President & CEO of the National Club Association (NCA), a 55-year-old member-driven organization based in Washington, D.C., that advocates for the private club industry.

THE NEW MODERN-DAY PRIVATE GOLF CLUB

Gone is the trend in men-only private golf clubs with strict full-time dress codes and a single five-hour, 18-hole golf option.

“Most people don’t have five hours to go play golf, myself included: I’ve got an 11-year-old daughter and a 9-year-old son at home. I



Augusta National Golf Club



Medinah Country Club

don’t have five hours on a weekend to play a round of golf if I want to remain happily married,” Wallmeyer laughed. “People today want to come and practice. Many private clubs have ‘performance centers,’ with covered bays where people can hit all year long, have their swing videotaped and work with a PGA pro. Clubs are also installing simulators. You’re hitting a ball against a screen and basically playing a huge, giant video game of golf. It takes only an hour or two hours. If you want to go out with your son or daughter or spouse and hit a few balls, that’s a great fun thing to do.”

ATTRACTING WOMEN AND CHILDREN

“Clubs are becoming family-centric because time is precious for a family,” he said.

“They’re designing events for ladies and the kids. They can opt to play three, six or nine holes instead of 18.” One private Northern Virginia club offers three holes on a Friday night for women who are learning the game of golf and who want to play with other women and enjoy wine at each hole. “It’s a social experience,” Wallmeyer explained.

My ears perked when Wallmeyer told of a surprising new move at Medinah Country Club in Illinois, which is near-and-dear to my heart: The year I served as high school class president, we planned our class prom at this stunning venue.

“Medinah Country Club renovated its number-two course with a program called



“CLUBS ARE BECOMING FAMILY-CENTRIC BECAUSE TIME IS PRECIOUS FOR A FAMILY.”

— Henry Wallmeyer, President and CEO of the National Club Association



‘Golf for Life’ that enables more people to succeed at golf. Instead of the normal four tee boxes on a hole, they now have up to seven on a hole, and they’re not designated for men, women, juniors, seniors; rather, it’s based on your skill level. If you’re a youngster or just learning to play and can’t hit the ball far, you can play much closer to the hole. My 82-year-old mother-in-law has played golf her whole life but can’t hit as far. She would love to play from a closer tee box.”

“We’re also seeing growth in tennis, pickleball and paddle tennis because these sports are less time-intensive. Clubs are engaging members more. Pools are no longer the rectangular, swim-team style pool. Now, it’s zero-entry pools, innovative slides and resort-style activities. One club in the D.C. area when it snowed, sent an email to members inviting them for a sleigh ride on the golf course. The chef served s’mores and hot chocolate.”

MORE INNOVATIONS

Clubs across the country are expanding their offerings to their evolving memberships.

Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo, Florida, offers a multitude of experiences for all of their member segments. Club programming includes sunrise yoga on the beach, strength and cardio classes, and kayaking for wellness seekers; premium food and beverage activities such as culinary classes and din-

ing at The Galley, a club restaurant which overlooks the adjacent marina; and two championship golf courses, among other high quality amenities and experiences.

In the Washington, D.C. area, public restaurants are much better now than they were 20 years ago, and clubs have to compete. “Clubs can’t do the Friday night formal dining anymore, because nobody is going to go home from work, get dressed up and go to the club to eat,” Wallmeyer said. “As a result, clubs are becoming more casual in attire, but not in their food. There are more casual dining options, but the club food is becoming ever more upscale; they’re ramping up wine programs and the ambience. A number of clubs have dining tables in their wine cellars.”

Members also want more wellness options. “Fitness centers, some with physical rehabilitation therapy and spa services, are offered. Clubs are incorporating more ways to ‘wow’ members.”

NCA guides private clubs in navigating through intricate business, legal and legislative matters, as well. “We’re guiding clubs in dealing with human resources and labor matters, environmental aspects, water regulations, tax issues, statute compliance and other matters affecting members,” said Wallmeyer. “We’re helping them in a very positive way.”

For more information about NCA, visit www.nationalclub.org.



Some clubs are adding innovations like indoor golf simulators.