

The Perfect Complement

Merging two private clubs has increased member value and improved operational efficiencies.

BY BRENT PALICH

On March 1, 2006, the governing boards of Mayfield Country Club and Sand Ridge Golf Club stunned the Cleveland, Ohio, country club world by announcing their intention to merge operations and memberships. Within two months, both memberships voted in favor of the merger by more than 90 percent and commenced operation of the Mayfield Sand Ridge Club.

These two clubs were entirely different. Mayfield was a prominent family club with numerous club activities and services, while Sand Ridge's reputation evolved solely from its fantastic golf experience. The thought of having these two different but complementing identities combining to create one dynamic club became a reality. The merger was made with the premise that members and prospective members would now enjoy unparalleled amenities in comparison to other area private clubs. Thus, member retention and recruitment would be enhanced.

THE FAMILY CLUB

Mayfield Country Club originally opened in 1909. The golf course was designed by local golf talent W. H. "Bertie" Way, who became the club's Head Professional for 51 years. During that time the club hosted the 1915 and 1919 Western Opens, and more recently, the 1990 and 2005 Women's State Amateur Championships.

By 1960, Mayfield Country Club was a complete "family club." It offered an array of amenities for the entire family — swimming, tennis (grass and hard surface), platform tennis, and curling, which are still offered to this day.



The Sand Ridge Course includes 160 acres of wetlands. Sand Ridge is recognized by Audubon International as a Bronze Signature Sanctuary.

THE GOLF CLUB

The property where Sand Ridge Golf Club is located was originally slated to become a sand and gravel quarry. The land was previously owned by Fairmount Minerals (Best Sand), a company based in Chardon, Ohio, that processes and distributes silica sand to golf courses nationwide. The property consists of 160 acres of wetlands, which Fairmount Minerals deemed too difficult to mine, so company chairman and avid golfer William Conway decided to build a golf course. World-renowned architect Tom Fazio was given 370 acres to design 18 holes around the native wetlands.

The "golf-only club" opened in 1998 to rave reviews. It became Ohio's first golf course to receive "Signature Sanctuary" distinction from Audubon International. *Golf Digest* recognized Sand Ridge as the Runner-up Best New Private Course in 1999, and it is

currently among *Golf Digest's* "100 Greatest Golf Courses." The course has played host to numerous USGA qualifiers and NCAA events in its brief ten-year history.

EMBRACING DIFFERENCES

In addition to the cultural differences between the two clubs, there are plenty of physical differences between the two courses. The Mayfield course has the feel of classical architecture. The soil-based greens are composed of the same mixture of bentgrass and *Poa annua* that is found on the tees and fairways. The turfgrass species in the rough are numerous, ranging from bluegrass and ryegrass to fescue and *Poa annua*. The course was crafted through a dense oak forest with generous rolling fairways and small greens. In general, it is well received by all levels of golfers.



The director of golf course operations and the superintendents of the golf courses coordinate projects and events at weekly meetings.

Sand Ridge is a modern-style course that boasts L-93 creeping bentgrass greens, tees, and fairways. The rough consists of a very dense monostand of Kentucky bluegrass, and because of its proximity to the neighboring sand quarry, there are a copious number of bunkers. Its picturesque routing around the wetlands is equally difficult and fair.

The differences are plentiful between Mayfield and Sand Ridge, but that has ultimately created one unique club. The board of governors and the membership embrace these differences. The numbers, in terms of golf rounds, speak for themselves. Before the merger, both clubs were averaging 12,000 rounds per year. Currently, the number of rounds at each course is virtually equal; however, the new club combines for 26,000 annual rounds. The interesting fact is how the play is distributed between the two courses. Nearly 70% of the club's 10,000 annual guest rounds are played at the Sand Ridge course, while more member play takes place on the Mayfield course.

INTEGRATING OPERATIONS

From the first year of the merger, the club has operated with one general manager, and all accounting and human resources were combined, while all other operations, including the golf course grounds, remained separate. Now, all departments are working closer together, including the golf course grounds at the two locations.

Our goal in merging the grounds departments can be stated simply: "To become more efficient without compromising member satisfaction." As if that goal is not difficult enough to achieve, it must be accomplished by synergizing two grounds staffs that are 17 miles apart.

So how do we accomplish our goal? Most importantly, we have to understand that each individual employee and department is equally important to the overall success of the club and that no individual employee or department is larger than another. If the club fails, each employee and department fails alike.

The restructured grounds department embraces this ideal. We now have superintendents overseeing the daily operations at each course and a director of golf course operations working closely with both superintendents. The role of the director is to guide budgeting, project management, member communication, implementing best practices, and most importantly to make sure that the two courses are working efficiently and effectively.

When combining grounds departments, we take extreme caution not to jeopardize our clubs' historical presence. We want to keep the integrity of each facility and not alter their previous identity. Each superintendent is chal-



The mechanics at both courses work closely to maintain and service the equipment.



Prior to the merger, aeration was completed with the assistance of contractors and temporary labor. Now the two golf courses have the ability to complete all aeration in-house by transferring labor and equipment.

lenged to develop a strategic maintenance program that is unique to the individual property. The variations in turf, soils, and even the type of golf rounds (member vs. guest) play an instrumental part in preparing the varied programs. When programs are finalized, we can take more of a synergistic approach with expenses and labor.

The two grounds departments continue to operate with their own staff and equipment for daily procedures. Labor and equipment are transferred for special projects and events. The grounds management team meets at least once per week to discuss a number of topics. In these meetings we elaborate on weekly plans, staffing, and equipment requirements, course conditions, and budgets. It is important that the entire management team understands how a project or event at one course can directly affect the operation at the other course.

Our management team discusses best practices throughout the week. When making purchases, whether large or small, we always consult with each other. We try to purchase similar items and in bulk as much as we can, providing us with a substantial savings. Now that our purchasing quantities have doubled, we are rewarded for buying in bulk. Doing so sometimes

forces us to make compromises; however, we will never buy a product if it's not going to be effective.

We refrain from having both courses closed on the same day. By altering outings, maintenance days, and projects, the membership is assured of having at least one course open at all times. Mayfield has a maintenance day on Monday, while Sand Ridge's weekly maintenance day is on Tuesday. Sometimes this can be very challenging, but through good communication and prioritization, we can ensure that all tasks are completed on both courses.

We alternate aeration not only as a member service, but also to allow us to better utilize our equipment and labor. By sharing equipment and transferring labor, we now can finish aeration in the same amount of time it took before the merge, using contractors and temporary labor. We can utilize half the number of transferred employees, as compared to the previous use of temporary labor, because of their familiarity with the aeration process and the golf course itself.

In order for our operation to be successful, not only does the management team have to work together, but the entire staff must understand the importance of becoming more efficient. Our philosophy is to hire, train, and retain employees who are proud of

their job and the organization, and who are willing to take ownership of their positions. Several of our full-time employees have either a college education or, at the very least, experience in the industry and are devoted to a career in the golf business. Some of our key positions at each course are assistant superintendent, spray technician, irrigation technician, horticulturalist, and equipment technician. Other key positions that have specialized duties shared between courses are arborist and office administrative assistant.

SUMMARY

Three years into the merger, the club is doing well. Members and staff alike have come together to form a unique bond. We continue to embrace our differences and we are dedicated to preserving our traditions. However, our unbiased approach keeps us searching for improvements. The vision that the board and upper management developed will continue to evolve. With proper planning, prioritizing, and open minds, we will continue to provide our membership with great service and equally great value.

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