

The Hidden Value of Hosting an Amateur Competition

There's a lot more than meets the eye!

BY CHRIS CARSON

In 1990, Echo Lake Country Club offered to the USGA to host the 1994 U.S. Junior Amateur Championship. We had many reasons for making this offer, but the most important was to give back to the game. There were many enthusiastic supporters of this effort, but there were also members who actively opposed the idea, concerned that we were "giving away" our course during the season.

We took those concerns seriously during our four-year planning process, and we worked hard to convince critics that the effort was not only good for golf, but that our club would benefit as

well. Little did we know how great that benefit would be.

Our first steps were to initiate long-range planning for the event. We asked ourselves what we needed to do to prepare for the championship, and we put it all down on spreadsheets. We looked at all aspects of our club, from parking to the clubhouse and locker rooms to the golf course itself. We didn't realize it at the time, but this process was, in effect, a strategic planning exercise for our club. The fact that we had committed to a deadline for the championship caused us to sharply focus on doing what we could

to make sure our club was prepared to be a successful host.

Site visits to the 1991, '92, and '93 championships gave us a good idea of how the event would run and of the needs of the players and their families. We also determined what would be required of the members who would serve as player hosts during the week. From these visits, and with the support of the USGA, we developed timetables, established expectations of how our members and staff would interact, and identified a few areas of weakness at our own club, some of which were a surprise to us.



The planning process started prior to Echo Lake hosting its first national championship. This effort resulted in many improvements to the course and facility. Ultimately, it culminated in the development of a long-range master plan for the golf course.



Seeing the best players in the country play your home course is an unbelievable thrill for golfers!

For example, during this process it became clear that although the USGA did not ask us to do so, we needed to enlarge and improve our practice facility. This work was completed a year prior to the championship and rapidly became the most visible benefit to our members. By adding target greens and enlarging our tee, we attracted more and more members to this area. Quickly it became — and has remained — the most popular area of our club. It certainly served the 164 boys well during the weeklong championship, and it has also served our entire membership since it was built.

Our course has benefited in many more subtle ways as well. Our own careful analysis of our bunkers uncovered some disturbing flaws, as did a similar look at tees, fairways, trees, and irrigation distribution. Though we could not tackle all of the issues we discovered, we have, over time, made improvements in each of these areas. These are areas we might have ignored — at least for a while — if we were not under the pressure of a deadline.

As the seasons went by, long-range planning moved inevitably to mid-range and, ultimately, short-range preparation. Along the way, we launched new programs and adopted new methods. We became aware of excessive trees on the course and the problems they cause, and we began the process of selectively culling out the undesirable ones, a program that continues to this day.

The championship went well, and during the week most of the members who had been concerned about “giving away the course” discovered a newfound pride in their course and a new sense of camaraderie with their fellow members. Friendships were formed and solidified, and, on that Saturday afternoon when a young champion was crowned, the general feeling was “This was great! When can we do this again?”

The answer to that question, I’m happy to say, was 2002, when the USGA brought the U.S. Girls’ Junior Championship to our club. This time we had even more volunteers than before, the planning was smoother, and the event was embraced by nearly 100% of our members. The week went off wonderfully.

As the superintendent, it is natural that my primary focus is on the course itself. In many ways, though, the larger benefit of hosting these championships

has been to our club. Ours is definitely not a cliquy club, but like most organizations, our members had developed their own circles of friends. Although there was an overall sense of fellowship among all members, these comfortable circles interacted infrequently.

As our members became involved in the various championship committees, an interesting phenomenon occurred. Small circles of friends morphed into larger groups and, after a while, into an energized membership pulling together for a common cause. Sharing the goals of supporting junior golf and to make the boys — and then the girls — feel at home at Echo Lake, our members became ambassadors for our club.

Along the way, lasting bonds were developed, and members formed a deep sense of club pride. In a sense, our vibrant club is what it is today because of the two championships we’ve hosted, and we look forward to our next opportunity to showcase our club.

The staff benefited as well. The many meetings of the championship committee helped the department heads develop a deeper understanding of member desires and the inner workings of our club. As we worked with our members to ensure a successful event, strong relationships developed that exist to this day.

One of the common laments of golf course superintendents is that our members just don’t understand what



Upgrades made to the driving range have benefited the club ever since. The range remains one of the most popular areas for members.

Value our club has gained:

- Focused strategic vision and planning
- Goal-driven decisions allowed us to work with urgency toward a timetable
- Team building within the entire staff of the club
- Club building within the entire membership — increased member interaction, participation, and club pride

Some course management lessons we learned:

- How good a higher rough looks and plays
- Hand raking bunkers adds a nice finish to our course
- How to get and sustain increased green speeds and smooth greens
- Water deprivation and its consequences to our turf

we do; they don't appreciate what we are up against. In developing a successful plan for the Junior Amateur Championship, many of the key members of the club developed a fuller appreciation of what their managers and staffs accomplish.

Of the many treasured moments I have of that championship, the one that stands out is the difficult weather that struck midweek. We received three powerful storms in a 16-hour period, totaling seven inches of rain. The green staff did a wonderful job of pumping, raking, and squeegeeing, and so too did our onsite USGA agronomist, Dave Oatis. What was most gratifying, though, was the spirit of our members who also pitched in to help. I have a photo taken just prior to resumption of play that shows the

general chairman of the event and two other committee heads completing the raking of a washed-out bunker. With rakes in their hands and sweat on their brows, it perfectly illustrates the spirit of our club: we were all together, doing whatever was needed to achieve success.

The three managers of our club — the superintendent, professional, and club manager — developed a similar sense of teamwork, and so too did our staffs. For the green maintenance team, the championships are cornerstones of our history that we frequently reference when defining goals and expectations and when remembering the fun times we've enjoyed.

As I look back to that fateful decision in 1990 and think about what our golf course and club have become in the

years since, I think the payback we've received by hosting these events has been remarkable. Though we focused our attention and resources on a specific week for a specific event, the real value, sometimes hidden, was to the course and our members. In our experience, the bar has been raised permanently; expectations are higher, and the resources to achieve them have, over time, been allocated.

We are now undertaking an extensive master plan that is aimed at resolving some fundamental design flaws and finally addressing some of the concerns that were identified but not resolved 21 years ago. Though it might be lost on our current membership, I am convinced that the seeds of this current work were planted by a few members who asked a simple question: "What will it take for us to host an amateur championship?" Looking back, it seems to me that the bigger question was "What will we gain?"

Hosting a week-long championship, if done with careful preparation, will provide fun, thrills, positive publicity for your club, and support the game of golf. But the larger value will be subtler and longer term . . . You'll be moving your club forward in ways that may not be evident for years to come.

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Hosting a championship requires coordination and teamwork, and working close together for a common goal pulls memberships and staffs closer together.