

started taking small group lessons together, with both men and women wanting to learn the game and play together.

Now that I know how they formed groups socially, I can target them as groups of eight-to-10 to reach out to them over the winter and keep their games progressing while we all stay in touch. I've done a good number of Zoom lessons, connected these students with TPI fitness experts, and generally stayed on their radar so they can keep thinking about golf and looking forward to coming back in the spring.

I also keep asking our new members what types of coaching and on-course programming they'd like to see, and I'm using that feedback to plan my schedule for this coming season. By recruiting them to provide ideas, they're invested in the new programs and will help promote them – I give them credit, and they have a stake. They love it.

What I see is that this isn't just about golf. It's about what everyone's looking for right now: human connection. As PGA Professionals, we go beyond your golf swing and what you score on the course. I want to be part of the quality of your life, and that relationship piece is going to be what keeps these players in the game when life becomes more normal later this year or next year. We're in a golden moment of creating relationships. If we can position golf as a way of enjoying life, then we will retain these new players for the long term.

tions and food & beverage outlets were open with very few restrictions. We worked hard to give these players that were new to the area a positive experience so they would remain customers as they continue to work from home through 2021, and I think that trend will continue beyond this year.

The resort, however, had a very difficult year in 2020, as 90 percent of our conference and group business was canceled. That continues to be the case through at least the second quarter of this year. Even though golf was one of the few departments to reach its revenue goals, we were asked to trim payroll and expenses, and that was very difficult on the morale of the staff as we were asked to do more with less for the betterment of the resort. When group business comes back, we may raise prices, and we will not have 11 a.m. group outings because that will cut into regular play too much. We're going to have to reevaluate pricing and availability when the groups start coming back.

Last year we adapted how we started golfers on the first tee, extended our tee times and had golf professionals marshaling the course instead of our normal seasonal help. We varied our shifts and closed the golf shop earlier than in the past to limit hours the staff members were working while still being able to service our customers. 2020 was very challenging from a staffing perspective, but we have a good team and everyone pitched in to provide great customer service while containing costs. We'll keep having conversations with the resort about how to keep adjusting with the outlook that regular play is going to continue to be strong, and we know we can make it through the season even if we're shorthanded.

# Doing More With Less at Resort Facilities



**Paul Leahy, PGA,**  
2019 Gateway PGA Joe Dodich Golf Professional of the Year,  
**PGA Director of Golf,**  
Margaritaville Lake Resort,  
Osage Beach, Missouri

As a resort facility, we have public play and a membership in addition to serving resort customers. We picked up new members and saw an uptick in member play, and public play, in 2020. Our public players are usually here for 3-5 days, then they go home, but last year they stayed for weeks or even months. A lot of people came here and bought second homes or had long-term rentals where they worked from home, and they became regular players. Home sales went crazy, and local school enrollment is up 30 percent. This was a desirable location, as our area attrac-

# Adapting to Accommodate New and Existing Players



**Paul Whitman, PGA,**  
2019 Alabama-NW  
Florida PGA Golf  
Professional  
of the Year,  
**PGA Director of Golf,**  
Pine Tree Country Club,  
Birmingham, Alabama

Membership at Pine Tree has grown quite a bit in recent history, with the club adding over 400 members in the past five years, including 125-plus in each of the last two seasons. The club welcomed 217 new families to the club in 2020 – 83 resigned, so we had a net gain of

# Host Interaction Events to Encourage Engagement

134. As a result, our biggest challenge is managing the tee sheet so we can maximize the number of members who want to play the course, especially on weekends. We have had to adjust our reservation policies and work hard to confirm tee times and numbers of players, but it has paid off by getting the most out of our available tee times.

We believe the first half of 2021 will be much like last year, so we want to capitalize on families having free time while working from home and having their kids potentially taking classes in a non-traditional way. Our strategy for getting all our members, new and existing, engaged is to offer more social functions at the club – some involve golf and some don't. We're also shifting activities away from weekends, when the course is already at capacity.

We expect the practice tee to be busier than ever, so we have tripled the number of range balls and just completed an expansion of the practice area, which increased our tee area threefold. Our adult programming will see more couples play days and group instruction opportunities, and a heavy focus on tournaments. We're also expecting another huge year for junior golf, so we have added extra clinics for beginner and intermediate players while developing more activities for advanced junior players. Overall, I'd say the main strategy we're finding to keep golfers engaged after the pandemic is to get them used to having golf in their life more often, so that becomes part of their "new normal" through building relationships, communication and programming.

For our new golfers, the hardest thing to overcome is what I call the "grass ceiling." Our job as PGA Professionals is to let these golfers know there are ways to play that may not be traditional, but allow them to get out on the course and have fun. In that spirit, we're promoting the ability to:

- Tee off from wherever you want on a hole based on your skill level. This keeps pace of play moving, builds confidence and helps them feel good about their scores while getting on the course.
- Relax the Rules! If you get stuck in a bunker or in the woods, toss it back on the grass. If you get to a score you think is enough, it is OK to pick it up and move on to the next hole.
- Modify the scoring. Count the number of putts you have or see how many fairways you can hit instead of focusing on your overall score.
- Play golf just for exercise. You don't have to keep score to get out and enjoy yourself.

Getting our players who love to practice and take lessons out on the course is critical for them to become long-term golfers, and any barriers we can eliminate will help this goal.



**Ben Welsh, PGA,**  
2020 Colorado PGA Golf Professional of the Year,  
PGA Head Professional,  
Frost Creek,  
Eagle, Colorado

At Frost Creek, members last year felt like the club was a familiar and safe place where they could eat, play golf and engage with others responsibly. We expected to pick up maybe 15 new members, and we grew by 70 new members. It's an interesting retention situation, because these new golfers bought in with new clubs, fittings and lessons. We want to make sure it wasn't a one-time expense that they don't use again.

This year, we're planning to have what I call an "interaction event" every day of the week. That could range from a fitting day to a parent-child tournament to a beginner clinic, or even some non-golf activities. We want members to never have that feeling of, "Well, let's go somewhere else because there's nothing to do here." We want to let people socialize in a way that's responsible because of COVID-19.

Much like it buoyed us in uncharted waters last year, communication will again be important this year in retaining and engaging our members – especially the ones who came into the game last year since it was a healthy way to get outside. If our registration is low for an event, that's not reflective necessarily of the event's popularity – we just need to inform people about it better.

We use weekly email blasts, put information in



Ben Welsh made sure that new members at Frost Creek felt comfortable during their time at the club.