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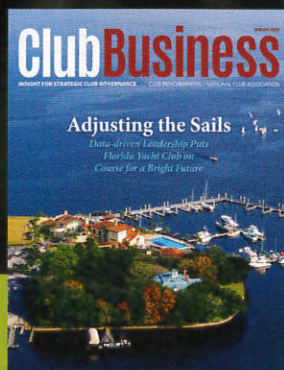
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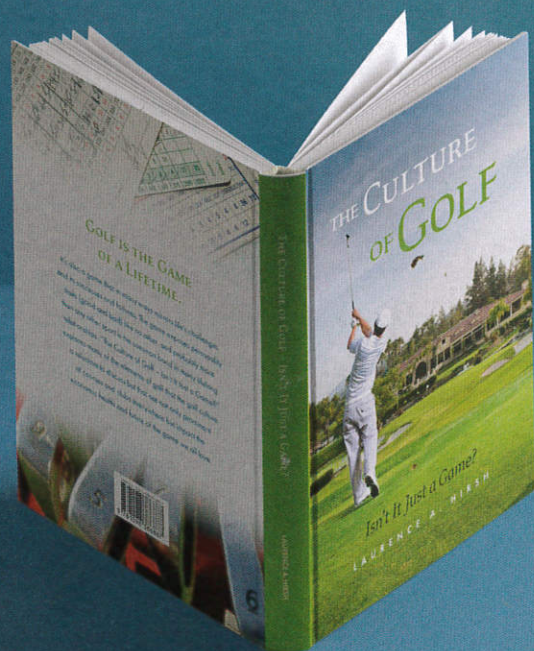
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SOCIAL PROGRESS IN GOLF

*Clubs and the Game
are Paying More
Attention to Diversity,
for All the Right Reasons.*

By Lawrence A. Hirsh

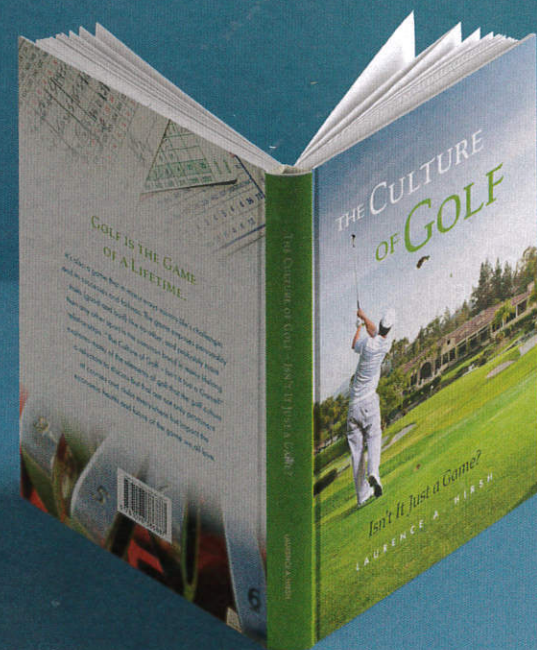


This article is an excerpt from "The Culture of Golf," by Lawrence A. Hirsh, CRE, MAI, SGA, president of Golf Property Analysts and member of NCA's DEI Committee. The book covers many of under-discussed, yet prominent, facets of golf culture that impact the game's health. The book is available at golfprop.com/the-culture-of-golf/ and on Amazon.com.

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This article is an excerpt from "The Culture of Golf," by Lawrence A. Hirsh, CRE, MAI, SGA, president of Golf Property Analysts and member of NCA's DEI Committee. The book covers many of under-discussed, yet prominent, facets of golf culture that impact the game's health. The book is available at golfprop.com/the-culture-of-golf/ and on Amazon.com.

The issue of social progress in golf is critical to the future and growth of the game. This evolution has been slow.

There are member-owned clubs, corporate/investor-owned clubs, benevolent dictatorships and board-run clubs. Club politics are rarely pretty. Change is often too slow to occur.

Many clubs have problems that need prompt attention. It could be deferred maintenance, necessary capital improvements to stay competitive or an evolution in membership indicating a change in culture. There's no one right answer for all clubs.

The most destructive change is when it occurs simply because club leadership changes. If a club is successful, the membership is happy and thriving and the club is financially secure, it's not uncommon to see a change in leadership seeking to "make their mark." Key staff are pushed out, rules are changed (or in many cases added) and the culture of the club is transformed. Sometimes, this type of change occurs simply because there is a change in leadership and those in power make the club their personal fiefdom.

I know of one club that upon the entry of new leadership had a director of golf for 30+ years, a general manager for 14 years, a head pro for 20+ years and a superintendent for 20+ years and by the end of a 5-year reign all were gone and the club is now on its 3rd general manager in that time-period.

The point is that "change" is both good and bad. Leadership needs to evolve to avoid unnecessary change elsewhere. A long-range plan should be adopted and adhered to by successive leadership. Change often needs to occur to get a club back on track or to evolve and update to be competitive. It's not at all uncommon for clubs that don't evolve and invest to fail financially because of a lack of leadership. That happened at my long-time club, Blue Ridge.

Country Club in Harrisburg, Pa., which closed in 2017, and is now a mixed-use development. Conversely, there are clubs with over-aggressive leadership that create a negative environment and a change in culture that results from micro-management.

Every club should have a governance structure of leadership that is in place long enough for stability but that changes frequently enough to allow for appropriate evolution. Like in Washington, D.C., term limits are critical, and must be obeyed. Congress is somewhat dysfunctional because of a lack of term limits. Clubs often have the same problem ("same old crowd"). Has anyone ever tracked the terms of club leaders to ensure that they aren't enduring in violation of the club's bylaws?

One area in need of change is the diversity of the golfing population. In the U.S., approximately 25% of those who played

on a golf course for the first time in 2017 were non-white. 82% of all golfers in the US are white, while 25% of junior golfers (aged 6-17) were non-white. With 40% of the population being non-white, there's room for growth.

Much has been said and done to diversify participation in golf. It was thought 24 years ago that Tiger Woods explosion onto the mainstream golf scene would result in dramatic increases in participation rates among minorities and youth. It happened but didn't last. During the period from 2000 to 2020 the game has seen a decline in participation and in the number of golf course facilities, as many have closed or repurposed.

High-profile all-white private clubs lasted until the early 1990s, when the Shoal Creek Club in Alabama, while hosting the PGA Championship, faced mounting pressure from civil rights groups, corporate sponsors and PGA leadership to accept Black members.

Now, climate change might be revealing other discriminatory legacies of golf. Urban courses, popular among Black golfers, can be more susceptible to climate impact than private courses in leafy suburbs, experts say; and city golfers, white and Black, experience the heat island effect at higher rates. Hiawatha, in

Minneapolis, MN provides a case in point, experiencing higher incidence of flooding than other courses in the area.

Brendan Shane, climate director for the Trust for Public Land, which ranks public park systems annually under a "Park-Score Index," said research shows persistent inequity in U.S. public parks, not only for recreational opportunities but also in park size, location and ease of access.

"Parks in lower-income and communities of color are often the ones who see the least investment. They're the ones getting squeezed," Shane said in an interview. "And of course, the problem runs headlong into the reality of increasing heat and increasing floods."

While climate change is being felt on all golf courses, Shane noted that urban public courses are often in floodplains or areas that are less desirable for other types of development.

The Langston Golf Course on the Anacostia River in Washington, D.C., opened to Black golfers in 1939 and was one of a handful of integrated public courses nationwide, according to the National Park Service, which owns the course.

Other urban courses are in hurricane zones, like the Golf Club in Audubon Park in New Orleans and the Gus Wortham Park Golf Course in Houston. Officials at both of those courses have tried to flood-proof fairways and greens. In St. Louis, the former Riverview/North Shore golf course simply closed after years of repeated flooding and disrepair.

The most destructive change is when it occurs simply because club leadership changes.

Women and minorities simply don't participate in numbers commensurate with their share of population. Most golf courses, and especially, private clubs are still inhabited largely by white men.

The issue of sexual harassment has taken center stage in our society. Just ask Matt Lauer, Al Franken, Charlie Rose, Roy Moore, Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey and yes, Donald J. Trump, just to name a few. There is a dearth of the "3-M's" in the golf landscape. But until recently, the issue of sexual harassment in the work environment has been suppressed. Unfortunately, there are now instances of sexual harassment in what has traditionally been (as fellow golf consultant Jim Keegan describes) "an industry, largely of men, by men and for men."

This is where golf's culture is its own worst enemy. Who among us that plays golf regularly hasn't observed the attractive, often flirtatious cart girl, often being harassed by the overzealous and sometimes over-served traveling golfer? How many of us have noticed the attractive female attendant in the pro shop or bar that invariably seems to exist? There are even comments about how the guy in charge of hiring "did a good job." Guys will always notice attractive women. No harm there, but if it goes beyond a certain (sometimes undefined) line, problems arise. Hiring attractive women in these positions because they can be "good for business," can put those women at a disadvantage in the workplace, especially, when there might be implied expectations. In golf's decidedly white, male dominated environment, when club members, resort guests, co-workers or managers take liberties, sometimes it goes unnoticed and other times is simply ignored. This has created an ugly side to golf culture and represents one more reason why change—socially and economically is in golf's future.

The Washington Post recently raised some interesting questions. While most of these referred to the political atmosphere, it stands to reason that the Me-Too movement, which clearly influenced the December 2018, United States Senate special election in Alabama, where Doug Jones defeated accused sexual predator (and former Alabama Supreme Court Judge) Roy Moore, along with the ultimate resolutions of numerous high profile sexual harassment cases could shape our culture in this area and be part of the golf culture for years to come.

On a most encouraging note, in April 2021 Pine Valley Golf Club, widely regarded as the No. 1 ranked course in the world, voted to invite women members for the first time in its 108-year history.

This is no small step. Not only were there no women members, but Pine Valley only permitted women onsite as guests after 3:00 PM on Sundays. In an email to members, club president Jim Davis wrote: "This evening at our Annual Meeting of the Members we made a historic change to Pine Valley's bylaws. The

future of golf must move toward inclusion, and I am pleased to report that the Trustees and members of the Pine Valley Golf Club voted unanimously and with enthusiasm to remove all gender-specific language from our bylaws. The club's policies will now allow all guests to enjoy our club without restrictions and we will begin immediately identifying women candidates for membership with the expectation of having our first women members in the club by the end of this year." Davis also recalled what a late member and friend said to him several years ago: "Remember, we don't want to be on the wrong side of history."

Pine Valley was preceded in this change by Augusta National Golf Club in 2012, Scotland's Muirfield (The Royal Company of Edinburgh Golfers) in 2018 and just recently succeeded by Ireland's Portmarnock Golf Club.

In the year preceding this decision, several events, such as the murder of George Floyd and the resulting changes made by many institutions (NASCAR, the US Military, the Mississippi state flag, etc.) signaled a fundamental change in our society. The election of an African American woman as Vice President and our culture's focus on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) has shined the light of scrutiny on golf and some change resulting in a progressive (albeit slow) evolution of its culture. Many clubs have reviewed their names, images and symbols with some resulting in modifications to logos or creation of alternatives and the removal of the use of potentially offensive terms (like Plantation). Others are reviewing their membership policies, especially with respect to gender equity and seeking to further diversify membership to include a broader representation of society. It's hard for the many corporate executives who populate the most exclusive clubs to preach equity and inclusion and then frequent a club that doesn't practice same.

It is now abundantly clear that the culture of golf is evolving—whether one likes it or not—in a progressive, and more importantly inclusive direction. This is (as the USGA likes to say) *for the good of the game*. Whether it be equity based on race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation or any other category, golf has a clouded history when it comes to inclusion. There are still clubs that (mostly quietly) do not include African Americans, Jews, Asians and other groups among their membership. It may not be public anymore, but it's fact. There are still some clubs prohibiting women, although not many, about a dozen nationally according to Golf Digest. Not only does society demand change on a moral basis but the economics of golf require a broader reach for long-term financial success.

In 2012, Augusta National, at least partly from public pressure, included women among its members. Pine Valley, not hosting a major, internationally televised event each year had no such pressure (that we know of) and this decision was unexpected.

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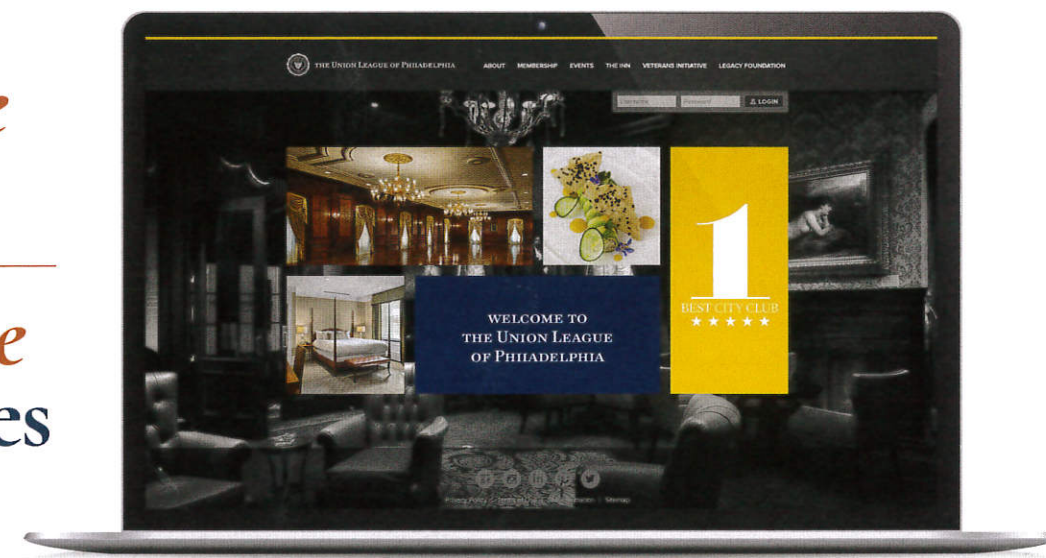


Whatever the reason, KUDOS to Pine Valley and their leadership for moving the baton forward—*for the good of the game*.

Golf's economic fortunes depend on growth. The decline in golf participation over recent (pre-COVID-19) years, combined with the closure of numerous golf courses is due at least in part to women being discouraged by the golf culture and millennials choosing activities that are perceived as more inclusive.

While not in a position to "change the world" the golf culture sometimes eschews the idea of being "politically correct" in favor of tradition, especially, at some private clubs. Golf could achieve the economic goals of participation growth while becoming a societal leader in resolving a cultural problem that extends well past the boundary stakes of our beloved ancient game. Golf has some wonderful traditions that should be preserved, however "for the good of the game" (as the USGA likes to say) a move forward, much in the same way as it has embraced most of the technological revolution in balls and equipment, could be the recipe for economic success.

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During the period since their “Caucasians Only” rule, the PGA has sought to continue cultural diversification in its membership, but with limited success. They still only have 165 African Americans among roughly 29,000 members. With golf professionals often playing a significant role in golfers’ development the dearth of golfers of color is at least partially the result of the difficulty young golfers of color might have in finding a golfing role model or gaining access.

Our grand old game most definitely has an image and culture problem. In April 2019, Augusta National Golf Club made great progress in establishing the Augusta National Women’s Amateur, signaling progress in golf’s “culture war” by recognizing women in a positive way. Unfortunately, in York (as described earlier) two segments of the “3 M’s”¹ (Minorities and “Moms”) weren’t so fortunate.

If, as the women in York claim, racial (and/or gender) discrimination occurred, it is reprehensible and should be prosecuted. There’s no place for that in our society (or our game), and even though we all know it occurs, those in the golf industry need to be extra sensitive and promote inclusion, to change the game’s image as a bastion of white, male dominance. This is not only a social statement, but one of economics. The “3 M’s” are significant and growing segments of our society. If golf declines to embrace them, it’s not only socially irresponsible, but bad business.

As stated at the time by Pennsylvania Golf Course Owners (PGO) Executive Director, Gregg Acri, “This (the York situation) is a situation that none of us, on any side of the golf industry, would want to be a part. However, the incident presents an opportunity to provide insight to all of us on customer service and customer loyalty.” Golf’s culture can be its own worst enemy. Recognizing this incident as an opportunity is a must for golf to ensure a healthy future in an increasingly diverse society.

While golf has made some progress in diversifying its culture, there is much left to bring financial profit to a sometimes-struggling golf industry, including clubs, courses, equipment, apparel and any ancillary segments of the industry. Young people, including those normally considered part of the golf demographic are choosing other activities because of golf’s lack of diversity which isn’t “cool” with the younger generation. This needs to be reversed.

NGF reported a drop of 1.12% in rounds played from 2015 through 2019, as shown. While 2020 rounds grew approximately 14%, largely due to the COVID-19 impact (which may or may not be sustainable), there are still courses seeking players. Let’s hope that the unfortunate occurrence in York and the national and international publicity it received becomes a catalyst for positive change and golf facilities everywhere recognize

¹ <https://golfprop.com/blog/is-golfs-culture-the-games-worst-enemy/>



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both the social and economic benefits of encouraging diversity in golf in particular, and society in general.

In most cases, the leadership of golf’s governing organizations come from the most prestigious private golf and country clubs. Accordingly, since many of those clubs have only recently diversified their memberships, leadership in golf’s establishment has been similarly limited in diversity.

Not long ago (progressive) rule changes by the USGA and R&A were enacted to make the game simpler and more enjoyable, especially, for the casual or new golfer. Many golf clubs and courses still need to welcome (not reject) high school and college teams and to encourage the “3 M’s” into the game. Far too late, it was announced in 2019 that The Honorable Company of Edinburgh Golfers (Muirfield) club in Scotland had voted (after a failed vote in 2018) to admit women as members of the club.

This is great news! Players have been leaving golf in favor of other (often more inclusive) activities and golf courses have disappeared at an alarming rate. How do we, as an industry and stewards of the game, use these encouraging signs to build on their progress and make the game strong? Many say there are programs, like The First Tee (which is terrific) and that organizations like

the USGA, PGA, NGCOA and Augusta National all have initiatives to promote golf. These programs are positive, but they’re simply not growing the game as had been hoped. The efforts to expand diversity in the game by some organizations is one positive step.

According to a 2018 survey by the Golf Channel, the median cost of an 18-hole round at a public golf course is \$36 including cart, but excluding clubs. Cost shouldn’t be a deterrent to most people and open tee times can become free golf to encourage new golfers.

Private golf clubs are particularly expensive. According to a study of private clubs carried out by Longitudes Group for *Golf Digest*, the most elite clubs demand an initiation fee of \$250,000 or more.

Only 30% of responding private clubs had a list price of \$7,500 or less. That is without annual “dues” (membership fees) which, according to the survey, cost an average of \$6,245 (approximately \$520 per month). Some clubs also require a minimum amount to be spent in the club restaurant and bar every month.

These economics also contribute to a lack of cultural diversity at private clubs and to the perception of exclusivity even at public facilities.

Women have been second class citizens at many clubs. In some cases, they have limited privileges and there are clubs where women

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aren't still permitted onsite either at all or only during certain, limited times. Often, where welcome, their play is restricted as well.

One of the unfortunate elements of the golf culture is the treatment young, often attractive beverage cart attendants receive from sometimes over-served golfers on course. The predominantly male environment lends itself to such behavior, which is the target of the "Me Too" movement. This and other examples of gender biased behavior are most definitely a reason why there are fewer women golfers than men.

Golf has resisted progress in many ways. The game shouldn't be "aspirational" (as suggested by Trump) it should be inclusive and diverse and needs to be to thrive economically. Sure, we now have advanced equipment which allows us to hit the ball farther, make mishits not so bad and putt better. We have courses that are in better condition than ever before, and golf has values that are unique and special that truly make it the greatest game in the world. But, golf has not advanced *socially*, nearly far enough. And it's hindered our game's economic progress at the grass roots level.

Historically, golf organizations have worked to overcome the objections that golf was too expensive, took too much time and

was too difficult. The "3 M's" (especially millennials) are willing to spend the money to play, because of our mobile and connected society have the time to play and that they are willing to invest the time to learn how to play. Unfortunately, many clubs have discouraged them with rules that impact the "fun" factor. Go check out a TopGolf facility. I doubt anyone would object to a little music there. Remember the "Best Damn Clubs?"

When considering social progress in golf, among the questions raised are those of whether golf has a social conscience, and whether the game has a social obligation.

Social progress is likely convertible to economic progress. Accordingly, the top clubs should lead the charge to making golf fun and socially responsible, to encourage the next generation. Not because it will make more money, but because it's the right thing to do. If the USGA and R & A can turn 34 rules into 24², clubs can review and streamline their rules. Golf's hierarchy has taken some small steps forward. **CD**

Lawrence A. Hirsh, CRE, MAI, SGA, is president of Golf Property Analysts.

² <https://www.usga.org/content/usga/home-page/rules-hub/rules-modernization/text/major-proposed-changes.html>



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