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\$1 million well spent



New owners Affinity Golf Management have reinvigorated Ferncroft facilities and membership support with \$1 million in renovations.

Renovation of Ferncroft facilities rebuilds member trust

Before Affinity Golf Management bought the Ferncroft Country Club near Boston, it held meetings with club members to find out how to revive membership rolls at the fading club.

According to Damon DeVito, Affinity Golf managing director, a light went on for his firm when one member commented: "We want to believe what you say, but you are inheriting a cycle of mistrust. You're going to have to deal with that here."

"That's when I realized how hard we would have to work to show these guys that we were for real," said DeVito.

That determination to prove Affinity's commitment to Ferncroft is why only 12 hours after escrow closed last Feb. 2, construction workers taped up the windows on the clubhouse and started to remodel the restaurant. Affinity picked architect Bill Atwood for the renovation. He had strong credentials in the golf industry, including working on the

Hershey Country Club in Pennsylvania and a bar renovation at Augusta National.

And the initial efforts, including \$1 million spent on renovations, seem to be paying off. Technically speaking, after Affinity bought the club about a year ago, there were no members left because all the annual membership contracts had expired.

Now, the club has a total of 293 members, including mostly those who have paid \$30,000 initiation fees for long-

term membership and 125 renewals of annual memberships, according to Toby Ahern, director of golf for Ferncroft.

"Eventually, we hope to end annual memberships entirely," he said.

Affinity, in Charlottesville, Va., has been in business since 1997, DeVito said, and has worked in 21 states as an adviser, manager and consultant to private clubs.

Originally, Affinity tried to buy Ferncroft a few years ago in an auction held by the Starwood chain which owned the club as well as a nearby hotel. That deal fell through when Starwood decided to sell the 27-hole club in a package with the hotel.

But the new owner—a Sheraton hotel—later decided to sell the club to Affinity for \$13 million.

Affinity is the fifth owner of the club and the first to own it separately from the hotel in more than 20 years. Over the years, the fairways, drainage and irrigation deteriorated. The 19th hole restaurant closed so that members couldn't even buy a hamburger or beer on site for about 8 years. When golf outings took place, the hotel shuttled in food for guests. The superintendent had to borrow equipment to mow the grass.

But the 18-hole championship course and an adjoining 9-holer still had a strong reputation. The fairways were the first design in which Rees Jones worked with

his father, Robert Trent Jones. Ferncroft has also hosted high-profile golf events, including serving as home of the LPGA Boston Five Classic for 10 years.

Affinity will continue to operate the revived club as a private facility.

Since the purchase, irrigation and drainage have been improved, the

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—Ted Robinson, Private Club Associates

swimming pool has been renovated. A fitness center is being added. Future plans include spiffing up cart paths, adding onto the clubhouse and building new locker rooms and a banquet facility.

What Affinity did at first—interviewing members—is vital when doing a major relaunch of a private club.

According to golf consultant Ted Robinson of Private Club Associates:

"The very first thing new management should do is to sit down with members to ask what they like and what they don't like; questions like, 'Why are you a member? What appeals to you about the club?'"

After that, he noted, "Look at the macro trends in the club business in general. Probably you need to identify providing something for every member of the golfer's family—children's activities and workout facilities and tennis for Mom."

Another club consultant, Patt Fero of the Goldmind Co., said that when a new owner comes into a club, there is "relationship building to do. Members are uneasy and you have to build confidence in the existing membership base."

Staff members at Ferncroft are definitely encouraged by the changes. Ahern, who has worked there 16 years, plans to stay on. "From what I've seen, the senior management team is very, very talented," he said about Affinity.

The club's prospects look bright, he added, in part because the Boston market is not oversaturated with golf.

"Some local clubs have been struggling financially and that's working to our advantage," he said. "We expect members to leave some other clubs and come to Ferncroft."

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