

USING GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUBS TO PROMOTE HEALTH, FITNESS, AND WELLNESS



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Abstract Participation in golf has increased in recent years exceeding 45 million participants (NGF, 2024) thus expanding the need to support members and patrons in new ways. To exceed financial and operational goals, a greater focus on health and wellness extends the playing years of members while offering expanded programs consequently increasing revenues and the use of club amenities. The PGA of America Golf Operations Manual (2022) teaches that the coordination between departments is critical for facility success. Effective utilization of a golf facility's strategic business units improves the quality of life of golfers while reducing the risk of mismatched diseases such as type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer, and Alzheimer's through increased physical activity and improved diets. This article addresses how golf and country clubs can promote health, fitness, and wellness to a diverse population of golfers consequently adding value for both parties. This is accomplished by examining the golf club's unique position to support participants in the six dimensions of wellness identified by the National Wellness Institute and Dr. Bill Hettler (1976) along with the club's strategic business unit's ability to support players physical activity level, dietary needs, and wellbeing.

Keywords: Golf clubs, Country Clubs, Health, Fitness, Wellness

Discover how golf and country clubs can support health, fitness, and wellness through various amenities and programs. Learn how these clubs can help you improve your overall well-being.

Golf and country clubs have been a part of the American landscape since the late 1800s, starting with the St. Andrews Club of Yonkers, New York, in 1888 (PGA, 2018). They have always been places for members to relax, unwind, and socialize, offering activities like golf, fishing, shooting sports, tennis, equestrian, swimming, and more. Over time, golf has evolved from a pastime for the elite to a sport enjoyed by approximately ten percent of the U.S. population (NGF, 2024). With increased participation and a broader demographic appeal, golf and country clubs are uniquely positioned to support a significant portion of the population's overall health, fitness, and wellness. This paper delves into how these clubs can enhance their members' health, fitness, and wellness, thereby improving their quality of life while also contributing to the operational and financial goals of the facility.

WHO PLAYS GOLF

The National Golf Foundation (NGF) is a golf research company based out of Jupiter, Florida, that provides up-to-date actionable data for the golf industry. It was started in 1936 to combat the decline of golf after the stock market crash of 1929 (NGF, N.D.). NGF Golf Industry Facts (2024) states that more than one-third of Americans over five were touched by the game of golf in 2023. Participation in the sport totaled 45 million, with 26.6 million participants playing on-course and another 18.4 million participating solely at off-course facilities. Golf's popularity has grown over the last several years, with steady growth beginning again in 2017 after a decade of stagnancy, thanks to indoor facilities and businesses such as Drive Shack and TopGolf. The COVID-19 pandemic also served as a booster to the game as people sought out safe ways to socialize and remain active. The NGF (2024) estimated that the average golfer was a forty-six-year-old male with an average household income above \$100,000. However, this statistic fails to represent the golfing population completely. In 2023, over one-fourth of golfers, 26%, were female, with 7 million on-course golfers aged 6 and over, a 25% increase since 2019 (NGF, 2024). The sport is shifting with the largest customer age segment being between the ages of 18 and 34 compared to the 2018 data which showed the most significant growth of on-course golfers coming from players aged sixty-five or over (NGF, 2024). The older demographic is expected to grow significantly over the next decade, as reported by Vespa, Medina, and Armstrong (2020), providing another area for growth and added revenue for golf facilities. Junior golf has been a focus of the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) with their introduction of the PGA Junior League and companies such as U.S. Kids and Operation36, which introduce the basics of golf etiquette and technique and then move players towards on-course play. NGF (2024) reported 3.5 million juniors playing golf on a course in 2023, a 40 percent increase since 2019, the most significant of any age group. NGF (2024) found that thirty-seven percent of junior golfers are girls, a significant increase from the fifteen percent reported in 2000, and minority participation for junior girls exceeds 25% of participation compared to just 6% in the early 2000s.

HOW GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUBS SUPPORT HEALTH, FITNESS, AND WELLNESS

Golf and country clubs provide a lot of amenities and outlets



that support the membership's wellbeing. The National Wellness Institute (NWI) identified six dimensions of wellness due to the work of Dr. Bill Hettler, co-founder of the NWI, in 1976, defining wellness as a conscious, self-directed, and evolving process of achieving one's full potential. NWI continues to encapsulate the meaning of wellness by including lifestyle, the environment, and the inclusion of mental and spiritual wellbeing. It must be positive and affirming and contribute to living a long and healthy life through holistic and multicultural means (NWI, N.D.). Clubs serve as a vehicle to support members in the six wellness dimensions by coordinating the efforts of each department for the goal of supporting the membership's health, fitness, and wellness.

THE SIX DIMENSIONS OF WELLNESS

Occupational Wellness

The NWI (1976) states that the occupational dimension of wellness recognizes enrichment and personal satisfaction in one's life through work. As memberships and participants age beyond work and into retirement, a need can go unfulfilled if there is no outlet for members to contribute their gifts, skills, and talents to something they find personally meaningful and rewarding. The sport of golf lends itself to fill this void because it can be played at an enjoyable level by a truly diverse population.

Physical Wellness

NWI (1976) defines the physical dimension of wellness as the need for physical activity, which includes learning about diet

and exercise while discouraging tobacco, drugs, and excessive alcohol consumption. This dimension contributes to physical health and psychological benefits such as enhanced self-esteem, self-control, determination, and a sense of direction. Golf and country clubs, through their activities and programming, have a significant influence on this dimension, motivating and inspiring members to maintain their physical wellness.

Social Wellness

The social dimension can also be influenced heavily by the club's culture. The social dimension (NWI, 1976) encourages contributing to the member's environment and community. Filling divots, raking bunkers, and fixing ball marks connect players to those who will play in later groups. Social wellness also describes the interaction between members and the impact each has on other members and the environment.

Intellectual Wellness

The intellectual dimension recognizes one's creative, stimulating mental activities (NWI, 1976). Members should expand their knowledge and skills while seeking ways to share what they know with others. NWI adds that members should explore issues related to problem-solving, creativity, and learning—all accomplished through golf and the interaction between members.

Spiritual Wellness

The spiritual dimension recognizes everyone's need for meaning and purpose (NWI, 1976), which includes feelings of appreciation for life, doubt, despair, joy, and happiness. Clubs provide a place for members to fill this dimension of wellness as they transition from employees to retirees.

Emotional Wellness

NWI (1976) describes the emotional dimension as recognizing the awareness and acceptance of an individual member's feelings. The ability to handle stress and other feelings allows members to take risks, recognize conflicts, and hold themselves accountable. On the golf course, members will face a wave of emotions, from anger to joy and anxiety to excitement. Facing these emotions allows members to remain well in the emotional dimension.

WORKING WITH OTHER DEPARTMENTS TO SUPPORT HEALTH, FITNESS, AND WELLNESS

Working with other departments, such as the food and beverage department and fitness or performance centers, is a crucial component of success learned by PGA Professionals while completing the PGA's education process (PGA, 2022). This work examines the food and beverage operation and how the coordination between golf, nutrition, and fitness increases active years of life and play at the club resulting in greater revenue for the operation.

Food and Beverage Department

Some clubs are already taking active approaches to supporting their members dietary needs with healthy options and focuses on fresh produce, lean protein, and reduced fried options; while other facilities have menus that read like the Golf Digest article "The Ten Worst Things You Can Eat" (2012), which includes hotdogs, sports drinks, nutrition bars, fried foods, and beer. Utilizing a portion of the club's menus to promote proper fueling and educating members on the benefits of proper hydration can improve play and cognitive functioning, reduce fatigue, and improve recovery after a round of golf.

Hydration. The Titleist Performance Institute (TPI) referenced a study by Smith et al. (2012) showing a loss of twelve percent of yardage and a loss of up to ninety-three percent of a player's accuracy with just a 1.5% +/- .5% drop in body mass due to dehydration. The 2017 study by Magee et al. found that a loss of 2% of body mass due to dehydration required a significantly higher number of strokes to complete a golf round, supporting the findings of Smith et al. (2012).

Pre-Round Fueling. Wells and Collier (2011) identified that pre-round meals are best consumed three to four hours before the start of play so digestion can make energy available before the round. Very few members will arrive this long before their rounds, so educating members and providing meal prepping and planning can become an added service and revenue source.

In-Round Fueling. Wells and Collier (2011) suggest low levels of clean carbohydrates such as whole wheat crackers and fruit. While the Wells and Collier study is dated it has been supported by studies from Nagashima et al. (2023), who had self-reporting suggesting that continuous carbohydrate intake during a round of golf may be effective in reducing fatigue and maintaining the performance of competitive golfers; Thompsett et al. (2022) who found that macronutrient feedings (both carbohydrate and a mixed carbohydrate and protein) self-reported less fatigue without affecting golf performance and alertness compared to a control.

Post-Round Fueling. Wells & Collier (2011) indicate that post-



round fueling falls in line with post-workout fueling. Increased quantities of lean protein and carbohydrates are required to replenish glycogen stores and aid in recovery after competing play. The narrative review from Berlin et al. (2023), recognized that nutrition for golf performance is an area that lacks significant literature but also concluded that carbohydrate consumption, hydration, and supplementation with caffeine and creatine monohydrate may all lead to improved cognitive function and golf performance.

IMPORTANCE OF DIET AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary online (n.d.), lifestyle diseases are any medical condition caused or exacerbated by a person's lifestyle, such as diet and physical activity. These have also been termed Evolutionary Mismatched Diseases by Daniel Lieberman in History of the Human Body and his interview with NPR (2013, October 1, 2013). Evolutionary mismatched diseases occur because our bodies are poorly or inadequately adapted for the environments in which we now live. Both terms describe the same facts that poor diets, inactive lifestyles, and the environment have contributed to an increase in lifestyle diseases such as type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease, heart disease, Alzheimer's, and even certain types of cancer.

Causes

The causes of mismatched diseases vary depending on the disease studied, but there are correlations between risk factors and certain diseases. The following sections explore some correlations between specific diseases and their contributing causes.

Type II Diabetes

Lifestyle factors and genes commonly cause type II diabetes; those who are overweight, obese, and physically inactive have a greater risk of developing type II diabetes (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease, 2016). Diabetes creates a greater risk for other diseases and complications, such as cardiovascular disease.

Cardiovascular and Heart Disease

According to the CDC (2022), heart disease, stroke, or other cardiovascular diseases are responsible for more than 877,500 American deaths per year. Heart disease is ranked the number one cause of death, and stroke is the fifth most common cause of death in the United States. The leading risk factors for cardiovascular issues are high blood pressure, high LDL cholesterol (low-density lipoprotein), smoking, diabetes, exposure to secondhand smoke, obesity, unhealthy diet, and sedentary lifestyles.

Cancer

Penn Medicine (n.d.) identified several risk factors for cancer, including the use of tobacco and alcohol. Diet and obesity are contributing factors increasing the risk of developing certain types of cancer. Consuming processed meats, high quantities of red meat, and foods high in fats, proteins, and calories can negatively impact body function, increasing the risk of cancer. Obesity is another factor that

increases the risk of cancer. Obesity can damage the natural defense mechanism of the human body, increasing the risk. Cancers of the breast, pancreas, esophagus, colon, rectum, kidney, gallbladder, and thyroid have been linked to obesity.

Alzheimer's

Korologou-Linden et al. (2022) identify Alzheimer's as a neurodegenerative disorder that accounts for most dementia cases. Studies show that the consumption of fried foods cooked in certain oils in excess can increase the probability of developing Alzheimer's, supported by Shi et al. (2021), who identify that unhealthy diets and lifestyle factors increase the risk of developing Alzheimer's Disease, particularly diets low in fiber. Contrary to Shi et al., Korologou-Linden et al. (2022) identified that family history and higher levels of moderate physical activity with lower body mass correlate to Alzheimer's diagnoses.

AGING POPULATION

The **most** considerable correlation between lifestyle and mismatched diseases comes from poor diet and sedentary lifestyles. This section looks at the shift in demographics of the United States with the understanding that age increases the likelihood of a lifestyle disease diagnosis. The shift in population demographics creates an opportunity in the golf and country club industry to reach operational and financial goals more easily. This shift also creates a greater need to support our current membership and avoid periods of membership drops that negatively impact revenues and services. U.S. Census projections (2017) show the U.S. population at 56.1 million people (about twice the population of Texas) over 65 in 2020, then climbing rapidly to 75.8 million in 2035 (US Census Bureau, 2023). That is an increase of 9.7 million people at or over 65. These are people reaching retirement age looking for ways to find fulfillment, as introduced to the six dimensions of wellness. By supporting members holistically, they will achieve a higher quality of life and additional active years of life. PGA Education also educates member professionals on customer relations. Retaining a current customer is less expensive than replacing one (PGA, 2022), a common concept in the service context, where poor service usually results in decreased usage. As the United States' population ages, clubs must prepare to meet and exceed their members' needs to achieve operational goals and objectives.

CONCLUSION

Country Clubs are well positioned to function as vehicles for health, fitness, and wellness to the members who enjoy the many amenities they provide. They feature indoor and outdoor activities that support multiple segments of the wellness wheel introduced by Dr. Bill Hettler, founder of the National Wellness Institute. Clubs can support their member's wellness physically, environmentally, socially, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and financially or occupationally. Some of these are easier to tie to golf and country clubs than others, but they are all areas of wellness that can be supported through different departments, services, and programs.

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