



Golf partnership tees off in Hopkinton and Northbridge

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HOPKINTON — In recent years, the recession has driven the country club business deep into the rough.

As many as 15 percent of the roughly 4,400 private clubs nationwide reported serious financial challenges in 2010, according to a survey by the National Golf Foundation.

Private clubs lost an estimated 5 percent to 15 percent of their members last year, costing clubs, on average, \$187,000 in annual dues, said Jim Koppenhaver, president of golf-consulting firm Pellucid, in a 2010 USA Today article.

As for the cause, one doesn't need to look any further than in a golfer's wallet, which has become significantly lighter as the economy has shanked and tanked. The decrease in disposable income, combined with upkeep issues related to membership downturn, has golfers putting their putters in the basement.

But the economic downturn hasn't deterred Tim Gordon, the general manager of Hopkinton Country Club, from keeping the club's golf business on course. This year, Gordon started the Freedom Golf Trail - an alliance of six New England private and semi-private golf clubs.

In addition to Hopkinton Country Club, the partnership includes Shining Rock Golf Club in Northbridge, Sterling National Country Club in Sterling, Norton Country Club in Norton, Hickory Ridge Country Club in Amherst and Quidnessett Country Club in North Kingstown, R.I.

The trail's concept gives each club's membership the right to play the other five without forking over more dues. All it takes to play is to join one of the clubs.

Gordon notes that each club was chosen for its high-class atmosphere and quality golf experience.

Proximity was another factor. No club is more than a 90-minute drive from another with Hopkinton and Shining Rock only 15 minutes away from each other.

As for the Freedom Golf Trail moniker, Gordon says he wanted to give the partnership a flavor of local history while reminding members that other course options are available at no additional cost. It's putting the "free" in "freedom."

"It's a brand for an interclub marketing cooperative," says Gordon. "Members now have the opportunity for new experiences at other courses without increasing the dues."

By working together in this fashion, the clubs can acquire more members.

The trail represents a potential boon for country clubbers and would-be country clubbers. At one time, however, the area club scene was lacking.

"There wasn't a club within a 15-mile radius," says Gordon. "(This) created the opening for a private club."

Enter Rebel Hill LLC, a Tewksbury-based investment company which was looking for a golf property to buy and when Saddle Hill Golf Club, a public golf course in Hopkinton, went up for sale, the firm acquired it in 2002.

To transform Saddle Hill into Hopkinton Country Club, British architect Ian Scott-Taylor was hired to create the club's challenging 6,700-yard championship course.

At the same time, Judd Brown Design of Warwick, R.I., developed a 27,000-square-foot clubhouse with fieldstone and cedar exteriors, warm wood tones and a vaulted interior.

The clubhouse also houses an array of rooms with an eclectic atmosphere and multiple uses including a library room, cocktail lounge, ballroom and exercise facilities.

The one-time initiation fee to join is \$20,000. Yearly dues are \$6,000. There are no greens fees. While these prices aren't cheap, the national average for initiation fees in 2008 was \$31,912, according to the Club Managers Association of America, while dues were almost \$7,000.

People took notice.

"When we had the property under agreement, we had over 100 members before we closed," says Gordon. Membership now totals 1,400. It has remained stable since the recession while other clubs in the area have lost up to 10 percent of their membership, he says.

Gordon expects the Freedom Golf Trail to boost that membership.

"Every time I meet a new candidate the one question I always get is, 'Do you have reciprocity at other courses?' " says Gordon.

What became Shining Rock Golf Club, with its 6,735-yard championship course on 146 acres, had originally been envisioned by a developer as a mixed-use plan of residential homes and a golf course.

When the developer ran into financial problems - a bank became involved and actually had the course built in order to sell the property - Rebel Hill purchased the four-year-old club in 2009.

"We were curious because Shining Rock Club was a future competitor," says Gordon. "When the project fell on hard times (Rebel Hill) reviewed it and saw nothing but upside."

After the investment firm had the club in the bag, Shining Rock became the Freedom Golf Trail's first partner. It also began earning raves.

Golf Magazine ranked the course fourth out of 100 honorees in its 2010 Best New Courses You Can Play and Best Value surveys.

Golf courses of similar caliber traditionally charge three-digit weekday greens fees. Shining Rock's weekday rate is \$63, \$75 on the weekends with golf carts free on both counts.

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"Shining Rock is a great piece of property and also a great story," wrote Greg Drew, a course rater for Golf Magazine, in his evaluation. "It doesn't seem like it's brand new. You would think the course has been there for 10 to 15 years."

The Freedom Golf Trail has already drawn praise.

"The program gives me the chance to play a variety of courses I would otherwise not have access to," says Ashland resident Todd Robinson, who is a Hopkinton Country Club member and head of its membership committee. "It's a great amenity for its flexibility and value proposition."

Janice Mathews, vice president of The Jan Companies, a Cranston, R.I., real estate and property management firm which owns Norton, Sterling National and Quidnessett country clubs, sees the trail as an open-source opportunity for all the members at all the courses.

"It's like joining five clubs for one membership fee," says Mathews. "Members enjoy the camaraderie of making friends and networking with people from other club communities. Our family just got five times bigger."

Yet, with all the hoopla, the Freedom Golf Trail presents a thorny integrity issue: it seems any member can join one club, pay smaller dues and spend all their time at a more lavish facility.

"Well, not quite," says Gordon. "If a member wants to play another in-network club, they can only do so at specific times during the week and are subject to the priority rights of the members."

In the future, more courses may qualify for the trail - they have to be within that aforementioned 90-minute radius.







But don't expect any hasty decisions.

"We're very low key," says Gordon. "If a course comes along that's within a reasonable driving distance for our members, we'll take a look at it."

For more information about the Freedom Golf Trail, contact Tim Gordon at 508-735-7540, email him at tgordon@niblick-golf.com or visit www.hopkintoncc.com.

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We created a National reciprocal network of private clubs back in 2008 - now nearing 400 clubs in 40+ states. It's called www.boxgroove.com Mr. David Fay wrote an article in July 2011 Golf Digest called - Sharing The Masterpieces. He says it's time for private courses to allow more golfers to experience their course. He speaks of the issues to overcome:

'It would not be difficult for American private golf clubs to adopt the British model. Concerns/excuses such as overcrowded course conditions, shaky golf etiquette, required golf skill and tax implications for a private club can all be resolved.'

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I hope the Freedom Trail is successful. Certainly, the private club business needs to become more progressive.

-McRedmond Morelli
CEO/Founder www.boxgroove.com
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