

A League Of Their Own

They may not boast opulent clubhouses or manicured greens, but these clubs without real estate are just as passionate about golf as those that do

BY MERRELL NODEN

LIKE MOST MGA CLUBS, THE GOLF Club at Amber View has a wonderfully conscientious greenskeeper. “Every few weeks he emails us to let us know that he’s aerating the greens, or that we’re beginning to have a problem with anthracnose,” says club president Jim Keenan.

But, in fact, the club has no greens. The Golf Club at Amber View is one of the MGA’s 111 clubs without real estate, “virtual” golf clubs in every sense except the very real pleasure they give their members. Some, like the Shore View and St. Philip Neri golf clubs do have a “home” course—Dyker Beach and Van Cortlandt Park, respectively—but others appeal precisely because many golfers do not want to be tied to the same course round after round, but are eager to sample as many different ones as possible. But wherever they might tee it up, clubs without real estate perform essentially the same functions as clubs of the old-fashioned, landed variety: They hold tournaments, elect committees, hand out awards, and even organize yearly trips to distant golf resorts. Sure, Amber View goes a bit farther than most: It has its own apparel line, including a hat that says 1895 on it. “Wow!” envious golfers exclaim upon beholding this handsome headgear. “Your club is that old?”

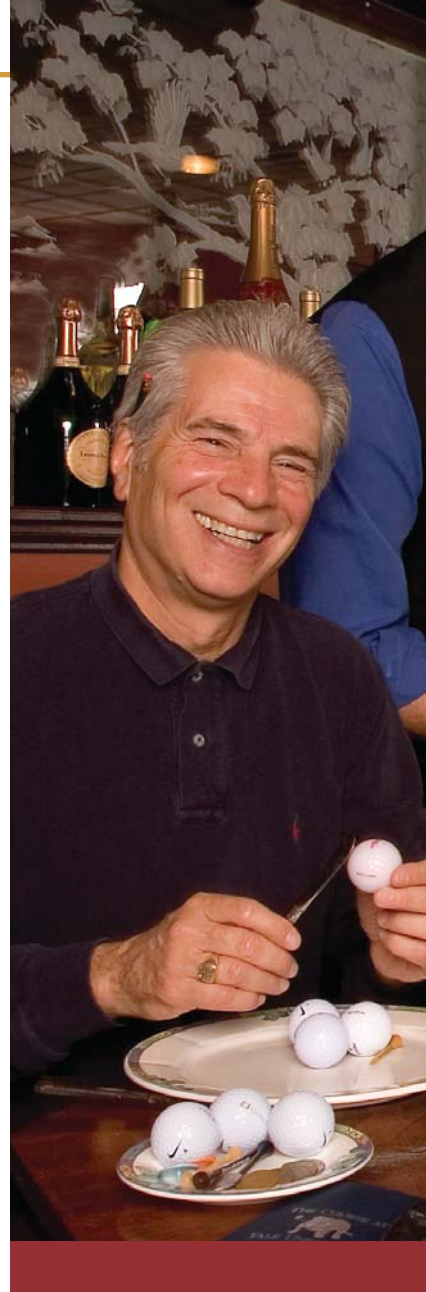
“Nah,” answers Keenan. “That’s how much it costs.”

But, as Keenan is quick to point out, we should not mistake their love of fun with disrespect for the game of golf.

“We don’t take ourselves seriously,” he says, “but we do take the game seriously.”

That could be the motto for all of these proud clubs, as distinct as they are in character. Some are built around professions (see the New York Lawyers Golf Club; the Seaford Volunteer Fire Department Golf Club; the Metropolitan Restaurant Golf League; and Quill & Tee, the Metropolitan Golf Writers Association club to which I must tell you, in the interest of full disclosure, this writer and his editor both belong.) Others are built around a workplace: The United Nations has its own club, as does the USGA (named Moggy Brook for the stream that cuts through the USGA’s campus in Far Hills, NJ). Flamingo Gaze was the name of *Golf* magazine’s club without real estate. That’s an anagram of *Golf* magazine, but unfortunately the club closed down this year.

There are a number of good reasons to form a club without real estate. For one thing, there are no costly maintenance hassles. For another, recognition from the USGA and





THE METROPOLITAN RESTAURANT GOLF LEAGUE

the MGA allows members to get an official Handicap Index. But the big one, surely, is cost. Amber View is based in Norwalk, CT, where it costs a bundle to join a conventional club. When Amber View got started, the initiation fee was just \$15 and a six pack of your favorite ale, and the membership doubled almost overnight, to 50. Currently, it's the biggest club without real estate in the MGA, with 155 members with registered handicaps.

It does not take much to start a club without real estate. (Heck, if writers can do it, you know it can't be too hard!) Basically, you need at least ten members who live in reasonable proximity to each other; who agree to maintain handicaps, play together with some regularity, and hold a regular club championship. The USGA also requires a club to submit a copy of its by-laws and a list of its members and their addresses. Indeed, Shore View's constitution now sits in the USGA museum at Golf House.

While Marty Mann (left) and his Restaurant League don't really eat golf balls, all of their teams do represent a Met Area eatery.

This year there's a new requirement for all clubs seeking USGA recognition. They must have a handicap chairperson who's gone through an official handicapping seminar. "That was always true," notes Peter Kaczmarek, the USGA's manager of club membership. "But we're now saying that that person has to have taken a test on the system during the last couple of seasons."

Kaczmarek believes that interest in clubs without real estate probably reached a peak sometime in the early '90s. Trying to get a rough tally in 1990, he and his colleagues stopped counting at around 20,000 clubs. He believes that around the country the total has gone down since then, but suspects that the metropolitan area is one of the few places where there is still high interest. Tom Dunnam, who handles clubs for the MGA, agrees: "We seem to add between three and five a year and maybe lose from one to three."

Many begin the way the Reggae Golf Crew began two



ST. PHILIP NERI



years ago: with a couple of golfers talking and deciding that forming a club would raise the level of their game. In the case of the RGC, its two founding members were not happy in another club without real estate they had joined, where the handicapping was sloppy or nonexistent, the disputes endless. “Let’s just say some people always seemed to get paired with the worst golfers, while others were always seemed to get paired with good ones,” says Ralph James. “You just could not play serious golf there.”

Since most of the RGC’s ten charter members were West Indians and they happened to be listening to reggae when the idea of forming a new club came up, they decided to call themselves the Reggae Golf Crew. The club has about 20 members now, all of whom are expected to shoot 95 or better on average. Mostly they play better ball matches. “Show no mercy [in a match]. Be social afterwards,” is James’s formula for a good club. This winter they are planning a trip to Jamaica where they will play in a tournament and surely enjoy a little reggae music.

The Reggae Golf is one of the newer clubs in the MGA. St. Philip Neri is one of the older ones, and from its founding 30 years ago it has been a co-ed club with no distinctions made between the genders (other than the fact that the women play from the shorter tees), notes former president Peggy Tierney proudly. “When I say co-ed I don’t mean just that men and women are in the club, but that they play together. There’s no differentiating with the men going out first. The weekly prizes at our tournaments are first, second, and third—period—not first, second, and third for men and another set of prizes for women.”

St. Philip Neri’s membership numbers between 35 and 50. When it was founded, the club was attached to a Catholic church on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. These days few of the members are parishioners. Coming from as far

away as Staten Island and New Jersey, they gather at Van Cortlandt every other Saturday morning and often stay for a barbecue on the back deck. The club’s social calendar is very important too. It includes a dinner-dance, a wine and cheese party, and a bowling night in the winter.

“While we’re not snobs, we do obviously have a procedure we go through [with prospective members],” she says. “We need to make sure the person plays with us a few times and knows the Rules and etiquette. We’re pretty organized.”

You’d expect such concern about etiquette at the United Nations Golf Club, which has been around almost as long as the UN itself. The club goes back to at least 1947, and while membership has been as high as 120 as recently as 1998, it now stands at about 60. Constant turnover is one of the obstacles to maintaining a club whose members think nothing of hopping the next flight to Kuala Lumpur or Luxembourg. The club tries to play every Saturday in season.

Dennis Sheridan, a wry Irishman who’s lived in New York for 33 years while working in the UN’s economic wing, is the club’s long-suffering secretary. “You have that percentage of people that just don’t come from a golf culture,” he explains resignedly. “They come from countries that have just taken up golf, and taken it up aggressively, but have forgotten that the main goal of golf is to bring people together for a nice afternoon of golf.”

Sheridan recalls the diplomat who thought nothing of taking his anger out on the golf course. “Some diplomats don’t behave well, something about immunity, I guess. There’s not much we can do about it, but we just make sure they don’t win any championships,” says Sheridan.

AND THEN THERE’S AMBER VIEW. Keeping in mind that Amber View is to most other clubs without real estate

JEFF WEINER (LEFT); DAVID EMBERLING (RIGHT)



THE GOLF CLUB AT AMBER VIEW

what Las Vegas is to other desert oases, this is a club worth celebrating. If Bill Veeck had trained his rather unusual talents on promoting golf, rather than baseball, he'd probably have looked something like Keenan, the mad scientist founder of Amber View. True, Keenan has never used a midget in any of his outings, nor has he hired actors to impersonate spacemen golfers. Ten years ago, while flying home from a business trip to California, Keenan stumbled upon a story in a USGA magazine that told how to create a golf club without real estate. Apparently, Keenan was delighted to learn, you didn't need a fancy piece of land or a six-figure income.

"It sounded pretty simple," recalls Keenan, in what surely counts as "famous last words." "I thought, If I'm going to do this, we can't just be any Joe Schmo club. We have to come up with something clever. I picked up my beer, held it up to the sunset and thought: Amber View!"

Amber View holds two outings a month, most of them triumphs of inventiveness. There's the Cooperstown Classic, where each foursome represents a major league team and competes against other teams in its division. Instead of a boring old long drive contest, there's a "hole and run" contest. "We'll put in an outfield fence in the middle of the fairway. The tee boxes are all set up with home plate and a batter's box and there's an ump with a mask who decides whether or not it's a home run." Right before NFL season kicks off, there's the Gridiron Open, where the tee markers are little replica football helmets and the home run fence is replaced by—you guessed it—a real football goal post. There's Golftoberfest, and this past summer something new: Clarkapoolooza, in which about a dozen Amber View members attended the PGA Champi-

Tierney (opposite, back row, fourth from left) is proud of her club's gender-neutral approach to its events; a hockey-oriented outing organized by Amber View's Keenan (kneeling, left of mascot) involved a Zamboni as the prize for a hole-in-one.

onship at Baltusrol dressed up exactly like Darren Clarke. So delighted was Clarke, who has been known to share the club's amber view of life upon occasion, that he got in touch with the club and asked for photos to post on his website.

Then again, not everybody wants all that hoopla. "If I started getting into all that, [my members] would just lose interest," says Ed Gaulrapp, president of the Highrise Golf Club, which, in its 12th year, has some 65 members who play once a week in April and October and every other week in between. It costs \$100 a year to join Highrise,

which is named for the buildings around the fire station at 48th and Eighth, where Gaulrapp used to work. Most of these clubs have a Gaulrapp, guys who accept the thankless job of enforcing the rules, tallying the scores, and doing all the things it takes to keep the club running. "They call me the Golf Nazi," he says. "It's either my way or let somebody else run it."

Marty Mann performs that function for the Met Restaurant Golf League, which he founded in 1993, back when he was the commissioner of commissioners in the Central Park softball leagues. The Restaurant League plays every week, with two-man teams representing mostly Manhattan restaurants competing in first a regular season and then a championship season. The year begins with a scramble to honor Mickey Mantle, who was present when the club was founded at his restaurant and recommended it. Mann resisted for a time, but when the Mick died, he decided an opening day scramble would be a nice way to honor him.

Shore View, which plays out of Dyker Beach in Brooklyn, is the oldest such club. Shore View just celebrated its 75th anniversary. When the American Golf Corporation took over

(continued on page 53)

(continued from page 35)

running Dyker Beach, it was kind enough to grandfather the club its traditional two-hour block of Sunday tee times, and Shore View has soldiered on with nary a hiccup. The club holds four "majors," each of which is 36 holes and thus stretches across two Sundays. Another popular tournament is the "Backbreaker," where, says Shoreview president Terry Byrne, "we try to trick up the golf course by making some weird locations for tee boxes and hole positions. We want to make sure nobody breaks 80." Shore View has an Old Timers' offshoot called the Sandtrappers and a women's club called the Brookridge Ladies. It even has a Winter Tour, during which new members are auditioned. There is a dizzying variety of games within the game.

Think of clubs without real estate as golf's version of DIY: They give ordinary guys—and gals, let's not forget the Mohansic Swinging Ladies, to name just one—a chance to fashion exactly the kind of club they want. When you join an established club with real estate, you are expected to fit into its system. That may not be the most onerous task, but with a club without real estate, golfers get to shape the club's character right from the start.

The Saltaire Yacht and Golf Club, for instance, grew very organically, out of a Friday morning game between four friends who'd take the ferry over from Fire Island to the mainland. "We've probably played every course within a half hour of Bayshore, which is where the ferry goes," says Steve Goldstein, an ob-gyn at NYU Medical School.

Four guys is not enough to start a club. So as the Friday morning game grew they decided to add a club championship. It drew 31 in its first year and Saltaire was formed. This year they had 56 players in the event. "The inner circle takes the golf very seriously, and especially the sacrosanctness of our Friday game," says Goldstein, then adds, speaking for all members of clubs without real estate, "I'm thrilled to have Saltaire in the MGA. If I could do it over, I wouldn't do anything differently. When I go places, I carry my membership card that says Saltaire Yacht and Golf, and we just think it's the coolest thing." ■



NIRVANA IS HARD TO REACH. ESPECIALLY IF YOU GO FOR IT IN TWO.

The world-famous "Island Green" on the 18th hole of our South Course, a heavenly par 5 that requires a heck of a shot. We offer 36 holes by Robert Trent Jones, Sr. sure to show you the way to golfing Nirvana.

THE *Fairmont*
TURNBERRY ISLE RESORT & CLUB
MIAMI, FLORIDA



Call your travel agent or 1 888 270 7786

www.fairmont.com

UNITED STATES CANADA BARBADOS BERMUDA MEXICO UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Florida Golf Vacations

Click or Call Today!

From **\$49**

- Group Leader Discounts
- 300+ Courses
- Much More!

www.teetimesusa.com
One Website — 300+ Florida Courses
1-888-GOLF-FLORIDA
1-888-465-3356

FREE Advanced Tee Times
statewide, with or without accommodations

All-Inclusive Packages
hundreds of courses, hotels and resorts

Best Rates
discounts, specials and insider tips

FREE, Unbiased Advice
from Florida's friendly golf vacation specialist
— now in our 14th year!

TEE TIMES USA

The World Leader In Custom Florida Golf Vacation Packages