

Making the Rounds: Local country clubs attract new members with lower membership fees

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The good old days at private [golf clubs](#) are long gone.

That's as true in Sacramento as anywhere in the country with access, quality and value at public courses as good as it gets.

That doesn't mean there aren't more good days ahead for private clubs – and an increasing number of golfers who might be able to afford the luxury – but the dynamics will be different.

Del Paso, host of the 2015 [U.S. Senior Open](#), dropped its initiation fee from \$45,000 to \$25,000 in the past month. The price adjustment sparked nine new proprietary memberships, more than in any of the past four years, with a dozen more in the pipeline.

[Rancho Murieta](#) used a recruit-and-reward program over the past nine months to generate 123 new golf memberships. New and sponsoring members get their monthly dues reduced by \$125.

Granite Bay dropped its upfront initiation fee to \$24,000 in March 2012, a reduction of about \$9,000, and the influx of new golf members has the club within 14 of its 475-member cap, a rarity for a high-end private club these days.

Representatives at the three clubs said proactive tactics are needed to pull them out of a five-year slide.

“In the past, it was build it and they will come,” said Arnold Billingsley, the general manager at Rancho Murieta. “Well, they stopped coming.”

Billingsley said one or two people every other day would come into the membership office and inquire. That wasn't getting the job done, so he got his members involved with an incentive that was hard to ignore: Find a new member and pay about 30 percent less every month.

Rancho Murieta has 600 golf members for its 36 holes, an increase of 90 from this time last year.

“I wanted to get members talking up the club,” Billingsley said. “But 123 new members since April? That's extraordinary.”

Del Paso dropped its initiation fee from \$75,000 to \$45,000 in December 2009, three years after a course renovation had swelled member rolls to 485 and in the midst of an economic downturn. It was the first reduction at the member-owned club in at least 60 years. The club now has 393 proprietary members.

In a contracting industry, Del Paso general manager Bob Kunz said his club had to identify new targets and approaches. In addition to the fee reduction, Del Paso created a non-proprietary category for people 65 and older. At a cost of \$10,000 (\$15,000 for a couple) and 70 percent of proprietary dues, the club added 12 over-65 members.

“There are many longtime residents in our older, surrounding neighborhoods that, for whatever reason, passed on club membership,” Kunz said. “Coming into a proprietary membership at 65 is a tough decision. This gives them a chance to come into a club environment.”

Every private club has what Kunz refers to as a “microclimate,” a tight radius where the bulk of its members reside. That’s true at Rancho Murieta, where Billingsley said about 85 percent live in the community that surrounds the course. At Granite Bay, two-thirds live within a 5-mile radius, said membership director Angela Hamilton.

Del Paso, Granite Bay and Serrano set the price point at the high end of the area’s private-club market. Hamilton said Granite Bay’s 2012 price reduction, a rebounding economy and a high volume of people moving into the surrounding, upscale neighborhoods equated to membership gains. For the past two years, the club has also offered a \$200 monthly credit for new members.

“I’d like to think it’s me,” said Hamilton, “but it’s a combination of a lot of things.”

Catta Verdera cost \$20,000 to join to start 2010 and is now \$5,000, according to its website. The club remains semiprivate with public play every day except Saturday.

North Ridge cost \$9,500 to join to start 2010 and recently offered a limited number of memberships at \$6,500, according to its website, with \$100 in monthly account credit for one year.

The economy has steadily improved since 2010, but people are still being conservative. The future cost of a private-club membership is anybody’s guess. Said Kunz of Del Paso: “An increase is far more likely than staying static through the (U.S. Senior Open) championship.

“Our culture has not changed. Our admission process has not changed. (Our recent reduction) is not a [fire sale](#) by any stretch of the imagination. Only time will tell if it’s the right number as it relates to our microclimate.”