



How Loch Ness produced a monster junior membership

Challenges

Opened in 1996, Loch Ness Golf Course near Inverness is one of Scotland's newer facilities. Until six years ago the Club had what its Manager, Neil Hampton, describes as a "tough 6800 yard course with no extra facilities apart from the driving range". At the same time its junior membership stood in the low thirties.

"From the very start we were very keen on creating a family atmosphere and making sure juniors got what they needed," said Neil. "It's both a long term investment for the Club and it's good to have children here enjoying the place.

"But being a young club it's not easy to create a junior membership from nothing."

Solutions

The Club's two enthusiastic Pros, Martin Piggot and Michael Campbell, were keen to develop junior coaching. When Neil Hampton and three club members became qualified clubgolf coaches it wasn't too long before the Club began attracting new children.

"We split the kids into ability groups and we set up a programme where they could have technical coaching with the Pros," said Neil. "Myself and three other clubgolf volunteer coaches teach the short game, bunker play, rules and etiquette."

In 2005 the club re-routed the original layout and, by adding extra tees and greens, created a shorter 18 hole course along with a new 9 hole course, increasing its capacity for coaching juniors. clubgolf coaching had taken place on Monday nights only but, with interest growing from juniors, a second coaching session was introduced on Tuesday.

"Because of the 9 hole course and the ease of playing it they are here right through the summer holidays and keep going around it," said Neil.

"We make sure the juniors are members to begin with so they can play as often as they want to.

"We give them a couple of weeks' trial and if they stick at it we ask them to join the Club – they all do.

"We keep in contact with the juniors as much as possible and make sure they get involved in the prize giving at the end of October."

Outcomes

Through a combination of well structured junior coaching, a junior friendly attitude and appropriate junior facilities, the Club's rise in junior membership has been staggering.

"We have been with Willie MacKay from clubgolf since the beginning of clubgolf and between us we've managed to engage over 160 kids in the game," said Neil.

“We are taking as many kids as we can and to me they can come and play at any age. If you are good enough at six then why stop them?”

“We have got all levels of abilities and are seeing a progression. The nine year olds we started with are now 15 or 16 with full handicaps.

“By extending our facilities we have accommodated a lot more juniors. Now we have 27 holes, a big driving range, a pitching area, bunker area and a putting green.

“It means we can have seven groups at one time all doing different things. As long as we get enough volunteer coaches and supervisors we can look after 130 kids at one time.”

Key learnings

Loch Ness Golf Course has always fostered the family atmosphere. As a commercial centre it recognises juniors are the future.

“We see the juniors as a long term investment,” said Neil. “We don’t charge them a lot for the junior membership but we like to think that as the years go by and they grow up they will retain their full membership and in turn bring their own kids along.

“We don’t want to make any barriers for children so we have two membership categories. The under 14s membership is £90 a year which gives children unlimited golf and access to coaching.

“There is a separate charge of £15 for the full season's coaching which is paid up front at the start of the season. Therefore they have access to the course seven days a week and full coaching for a total of £105.

“We believe this is good value for money for them because they can come and go as they like, there are no restrictions on time and there are no specific days they can’t play.”

The future

Loch Ness Golf Club has recently received a £500 discretionary grant from clubgolf, which has been allocated to clubgolf Stage 3 coaching for more advanced juniors.

“The ultimate outcome is if we get more people into the game and keep the game growing then the better it will be for everyone involved in golf,” added Neil.

Ends

