

## THE ISLAND GOLFER



# LBGC burnishes its brand, initiates golf course makeover

■ BY SCOTT COTHERMAN

*Editor's Note: This is the second of a two-part series highlighting the marketing and brand building efforts at area golf clubs, which raise their profiles in local, regional, and national markets. Each featured club has stood the test of time and boasts full membership rosters. Today's spotlight is on Lemon Bay Golf Club.*

Ask anyone in Boca Grande and they will tell you that change comes hard. And when it comes to driving transformational change in these parts, it is next to impossible. That is what is so impressive about the advancements made at Lemon Bay Golf Club and the leadership effort behind it. Yet it hasn't come without the typical fits and false starts encountered at many private clubs attempting renewal.

Four years ago, the leaders at Lemon Bay recognized it was time to renovate their modest golf course, but only partially. In club parlance, the word renovation is synonymous with "member capital assessment," something club members never like to hear. To say that Lemon Bay members weren't change ready for such an investment would be an understatement. The negative feedback from members was strong and swift, causing club leadership to reevaluate their plan and chart a new course.

In March 2020, just as the pandemic began, Peter Powell was elected President of the club. He wasted no time in appointing board member and Treasurer Tom O'Shane to lead development of a long-term strategic plan to improve the member experience. This resulted in formation of the Look to the Future task force comprised of members with experience driving transformational change. This time, they got it right.

An accomplished golfer, O'Shane was a banker by trade, now retired. In Pittsburgh, he created a niche business of financing golf course renovations. He had the right background for the job, so the opportunity to lead the task force was a natural fit.

"I put together what I called the three-legged stool," explains O'Shane. "The first leg is the obligatory costs, a new irrigation system and new greens because they were very old, past their useful life. The second leg is the aspirational cost, which is redesigning the

golf course, bringing it up to modern standards, taking advantage of the footprint we have here on 86 acres. And the third leg is visionary, putting energy behind the course upgrades with a club branding modernization project."

The task force, under O'Shane's capable leadership, wasted no time. They hired industry consultants McMahon Group, to help develop a long-term strategic plan, and Club Benchmarking, for a capital reserve study. Prior, Lemon Bay never had a strategic plan over three decades of its existence.

Golf course architects and contrac-

tors were then interviewed, resulting in the hiring of Drew Rogers and Leibold Irrigation. Among a long list of course renovations, Rogers cites Congressional Country Club, Old Elm Club, and the Country Club of North Carolina, nationally, and Royal Poinciana Golf Club, Collier's Reserve Country Club, and Valencia Golf & Country Club in Naples. Leibold Irrigation was the contractor for the recent course renovation at Coral Creek Club in Placida.

"Blew them away," recalls O'Shane about Rogers first meeting with the task force. "Drew told the group that 'I do not want to change Lemon Bay; I want to make Lemon Bay a better version of itself.' And that was the key slogan that basically we hit on and drove us forward."

Successful transformational change and brand renewal efforts actively engage the people most impacted by the proposed changes. No truer than at Lemon Bay. Peter Powell, past club president and Tom O'Shane, as task force leader and current club president, understood that dynamic, especially after the first proposal was soundly rejected by the club's membership.

Long-time members revered their club and its culture and were generally satisfied with the golf course as it was. Convincing them of the need for change and the investment required

from each member to make it happen was no easy task. Complacency had set in. And the club financials reflected this posture.

Despite a full membership and continued demand in the local marketplace, initiation fees hadn't been raised in five years. Operating shortfalls were subsidized by new member initiation fees, a death knell in the private club business. Moreover, golf course renovations are multi-million-dollar projects funded in part by member assessments. Getting the membership behind the renewal plan was crucial for Powell, O'Shane and the task force members.



The McMahon Group fielded an independent survey to the membership. "We told the membership that if we don't get 70 percent approval from them on this project, then we're not going forward," says

O'Shane. "The results came back at 87 percent. So the membership really bought into it because we showed them what we were going to do, how we're going to pay for it and what it meant to them."

Greenlighted, the task force and their consultants went to work. They added to their team a boutique sports branding consultancy from Minneapolis, The Sussner Group. Owner Derek Sussner's key insight from the work performed to date was that despite members' belief that it was time for a brand update, they did not want to lose the spirit of the brand. According to O'Shane, task-force member Polly Flynn was a driving force behind the change in brand identity and worked closely with Sussner's team.

At Lemon Bay, the club had built a brand based on camaraderie. The members valued their relationships with one another and with the club's staff; their pride in being a part of the community, where they feel at home; and their appreciation for the wildlife on the course. Flynn and the task force understood that the members believed their club to be "more than a

piece of land, it is an unmatched preserve for the game of golf, wildlife and human connection."

Notably, Lemon Bay is the only Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary among local golf clubs and recertification is required every three years based upon strict performance criteria geared toward preservation and education.

At a town hall meeting held in the Lemon Bay clubhouse in January, the updated brand identity was revealed to a standing ovation from the membership. This included the introduction of two new logos, one a member-only monogram.

According to Tom O'Shane in a letter to the membership, "our new logo represents the connection between people, nature and golf. It was inspired by our deep roots in community and our commitment to optimism. This abstract lemon tree is mature, evergreen, and fruitful — a home for wildlife and a sanctuary for our members."

Later this year, Lemon Bay members will be treated to a newly restored and updated golf course, designed and built by noted experts in their fields. Next up for club leadership is the development of a master plan for the clubhouse and all facilities. They have engaged Peacock + Lewis, a leading private club architectural firm to assist with that effort. Enthusiasm for the changes to improve the membership experience remains high.

Along the Cape Haze Peninsula, spring is in the air. Post-ian revival efforts are everywhere. Renewal is the catchword of the day. No more so than at Lemon Bay Golf Club, where the course renovation is now underway, but the revival effort — emanating from prescient leadership — began just four years ago.

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■ Lemon Bay Golf Club's new logo inspired by its deep roots in community and commitment to optimism.