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7.30 Report

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More than one million Australians play golf. But while it is the country's most popular sport, golf is suffering from a steep membership decline that is putting the future of some clubs at risk. While elite clubs still have waiting lists years long, the average golf club membership in Australia is now down to levels not seen since 1989 and the reluctance of people to commit long term is beginning to bite - especially in suburban and regional areas. So much so that the experts say golf clubs need to break their traditional approach and modernise if they want to survive.

ZOE DANIEL: It's a sport steeped in time and tradition.

But it's not immune to the trials of the modern world.

RON SHATTOCK, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ADELAIDE SHORES GOLF PARK: Golfing generally - our advice is it's been on the decline, particularly for the last couple of years.

2000/2001 year, we dropped our number of rounds played by 5 per cent and the same again the following year.

So we're about down 10 per cent.

COLIN PHILLIPS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AUSTRALIAN GOLF UNION: Clubs that are on the outskirts of major metropolitan areas are suffering.

They've traditionally been the starting point for a lot of golf club members.

They're having difficulty in filling their ranks.

ZOE DANIEL: There's no doubt that lots of people play golf.

In fact, it's Australia's most popular sport, but it is declining.

Some 1.24 million people, or 8.4 per cent of the population, swing a club at one time or another.

But the major problem is only a quarter are now paid-up members.

RODNEY TIMM, ERNST AND YOUNG: A round of golf is a long-time commitment and there seems to be quite a lot of emerging competitive leisure activities, particularly in the extreme sports, which are smaller time bites, and you obviously have your leisure experience like that.

But there also seems to be a trend, certainly with younger potential members, of not wanting to outlay the financial commitment that is necessary to become a member of the traditional golf courses.

MARTY CHRISTENSEN, RECREATIONAL GOLFER: We're not poor, by any means, but we're not wealthy either, so we have to watch what we spend.

Sometimes the luxury things, like playing golf, are few and far between.

DAMIEN CHRISTENSEN, RECREATIONAL GOLFER: Well, it doesn't make sense to be a member and pay \$300, \$400, \$600 and for five or six months of the year you just haven't got the opportunity to play.

ZOE DANIEL: A recent report from financial research company Ernst & Young confirmed the problem that the historic sport of golf is being hit hard.

A survey of over 1,500 affiliated golf clubs found membership has fallen 3 per cent across the board in the last five years.

On average, club member levels are at their lowest point in 14 years and, for regional and suburban clubs, that's a big problem.

RODNEY TIMM: Out in the country they have got problems which they have to address, and also the mid-range, more traditional clubs, I think also have problems.

And they need to see how they can proactively respond to the new demands of the new golf player.

ZOE DANIEL: This golf club at Geelong, near Melbourne, has fallen victim.

It's currently negotiating to transfer its members to a new club being developed at the nearby trendy coastal centre of Torquay, which illustrates the point people ARE prepared to travel and many would prefer to pay \$30 to \$70 per round to play than commit to a single club, even if it is close to home.

BRETT MCMARTIN, HEAD PROFESSIONAL, YARRA BEND GOLF COURSE: I think people have got a priority on their leisure time - um, it's limited, they can't necessarily play every week, so the high fees of joining a private club are not justified now.

So just the casual nature of coming to a public golf course, having a nice relaxing game when they want it I think appeals to a lot of people these days.

DAMIEN CHRISTENSEN: It's the ability to go and try out different courses that is a bit of a challenge as well.

If you play the same course every week or every fortnight, maybe there's a boredom factor with that.

RODNEY TIMM: The 21st century golf player - he's probably got different requirements.

He's probably far more mobile than before, so therefore wouldn't want to have a long-term commitment in terms of having to pay a membership fee upfront and then an annual membership as well, because he doesn't know if he's going to be around at that location for the longer term.

ZOE DANIEL: The Australian Golf Union has launched an awareness campaign to encourage golf clubs to address the issue and is using role models to encourage young people to take up the game.

But clubs are pushing uphill against rising insurance premiums and competition from hotels licensed to have poker machines.

So they have to adopt business strategy to modernise and survive.

SCOTT EDGECOMBE, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA: The old things that worked at those times years ago don't necessarily work now and that's what we're getting from our customer surveys.

Things have to be done differently.

ZOE DANIEL: The University of South Australia is one organisation working with golf clubs on marketing strategies and financial benchmarking.

SCOTT EDGECOMBE: Talking things like how well the teeing off is being managed, the etiquette of the course, are there enough drinking fountains around the place.

These are issues that are pertinent to a lot of customers coming to a course.

ZOE DANIEL: Morack golf course in outer suburban Melbourne is one that's taking a proactive approach.

It's surveying players and offering special deals to encourage them to come back rather than going to other courses.

LISA WHITEHOUSE, MORACK GOLF COURSE: We're finding that we don't have a core group of people just coming through this course, so one of our challenges, I suppose, is to try and attract them back for their three or four games a year.

ZOE DANIEL: Golf has an economic value of about \$300 million a year in Australia.

However, there's plenty of competition for that money - a fact that golf courses are going to have to recognise if they expect to get a grip on the problem.