

The new Bluejack National in Montgomery, TX, near Houston will open a Tiger Woods-designed golf course this fall. But Casey Paulson, vice president of Beacon Land Development, knows that Texans like adventure, so the club will also feature less-traditional amenities, such as The Fort, an area that combines lake access with zip lines, tree houses, bowling lanes, a skate park, a burger shack, a crafts room, a wiffle ball park, a football field, and a tennis center.

“With an area like this, kids, families, and even adults can enjoy multiple fun, enriching experiences in a short amount of time,” Paulson says. “The proximity of this area to our ‘Playgrounds’ course will also lead to families going from amenity area to amenity area, nongolf to golf.”

While golf still is the most visible amenity at most private clubs and private club communities, its days of being the carrot that attracts and retains membership have dwindled as golf participation has decreased during the past several years.

For example, according to Golf Datatech, rounds played in the United States declined 1.7 percent in 2014 from 2013. (Rounds played at private clubs essentially stayed flat.) In 2013, Datatech reported that rounds played nationally fell 4.9 percent compared with 2012, including a 9.7 percent drop at private clubs from 2012.

The reductions in rounds played at private clubs over the years has prompted their leadership to introduce amenities and activities outside of golf to not only retain membership, but also attract entirely new groups of members who might not know—or care—about the difference between a birdie and bogey.

“All of us, as club managers and operators, need to be looking at alternative amenities to attract more people,” Paulson says. “There’s plenty of industry studies the past couple of years that say wives and kids make decisions for the club instead of Dad, so typically you have to have more things for them to do.”

High-end clubs in particular, Paulson says, have to offer a wide variety of amenities and activities.

“You have to be open to a lot of different folks,” Paulson says. “It’s going to get harder to build stand-alone golf clubs, so you

have to fill the clubs with other amenities. We’re also trying to sell real estate. So if you’re trying to sell real estate, you’d better have more comprehensive offerings than just golf.”

What activities are members asking for? The sky appears to be the limit in terms of their interests.

“Our members are wanting to do tons of different things outside of golf,” says Traci Bichalski, CCM, general manager of Great Oaks Country Club in Rochester, MN. “Last year we offered a bike club, a hiking group, running, kayaking group, yoga classes. One thing that was popular at my previous club was paddleboard and paddleboard yoga. Members love doing those wild and crazy things.”

Rob Oosterhuis, director of clubs at The Four Seasons Resort and The Biltmore Santa Barbara (CA), also says paddleboarding is a big hit with members.

“It’s been hugely popular,” Oosterhuis says. “We have a contractor nearby who does lessons. We’re trying to leverage everything we have at our facility.”

Adirondack League Club in Old Forge, NY, is a traditional hunting, fishing, and family recreation club, but according to General Manager Egan Willard, CCM, the current demand is for organized lacrosse and soccer games.

THE QUINTESSENTIAL COUNTRY CLUB SPORT

Birmingham (MI) Country Club, meanwhile, is one of a growing number of clubs that have introduced pickleball to its members. For the uninitiated, pickleball is a sport in which up to four players use solid paddles to hit a perforated polymer ball—similar to a wiffle ball—over a net. In a way, pickleball is the quintessential country club sport, because it doesn’t take up much

space, takes little skill, and can be played by members of all ages.

“We are getting a lot of requests for pickleball,” says Birmingham Country Club General Manager Joe Basso, MCM, CCE. “It has grown in popularity down south (Florida), and a lot of our members are bringing it back with them. We are redoing our tennis/racquet complex and in addition to planning for paddle/platform tennis, we are making adjustments to accommodate pickleball.”

Also a part of this master planning is leaving plenty of green space to accommodate two bocce ball courts and two croquet courses.

Pickleball works across geographies and demographics, but as with most things sales-related, location is a key to success. That is, clubs that are succeeding with golf-alternative amenities are the ones whose amenities fit their environments and their members’ interests.

“I think the dynamic has changed the past 4 ½ years,” says Sara Rainey, manager of special events and member activities at Encanterra Country Club in Sun Tan Valley, AZ. “That comes with the growth of the community. When I first came here, golf was a very strong focus for us. As we have grown over the years, we have found we have support with a number of other things, like pickleball, tennis, culinary club, and a community service league.”

Events such as cooking demonstrations and nutritional seminars are popular at the club.

“As the community gets more momentum, you start to realize that people who have worked their entire lives now just want to relax and do what their passions are but have never had time to do,” Rainey says. “A lot of our golfers realize that as they age, they can’t play every day anymore. But they have a lot of other things that they can participate in. They just don’t want to sit around anymore—they want to be socially engaged.”

Willard and Oosterhuis note that adding these types of amenities doesn’t necessarily require a large budget. Look within your

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Members of the Yellowstone Club in Big Sky, MT, enjoy 2,200 acres of private powder.

Photo courtesy of Discovery Land Company

existing staff to see if you have someone who already participates in an activity or who played the sport in high school or college.

“It really helps the staff member connect with members,” Oosterhuis says. “If you have a manager (to lead a program), attach their name to it and promote it.

“Even better, if you have a member own an event, say, ‘I know you have 20 close friends. If we do an event, can we attach your name to it?’ Make them the ‘grand marshal.’ People don’t want to let down another member. Plus, the member gets to see the planning and execution, appreciate what is involved in putting something together.”

Oosterhuis also likes special events, such as health fairs, trivia nights, and even a southern California “winter wonderland” complete with fake snow and a toboggan run.

“These kinds of events are hot in southern California,” Oosterhuis says.

MATCHING AMENITIES TO LOCALES

Discovery Land Co., which has private clubs and resorts from New York to Los Cabos to Hawaii, has perfected the art of matching amenities with locales. The company’s Outdoor Pursuits program offers activities inside and outside the gates of each club, such as hiking Glacier National Park near Iron Horse Golf Club in Whitefish, MT, or kayaking and crabbing at Baker’s Bay Golf & Ocean Club in the Bahamas.

The Outdoor Pursuits program sets the tone for “the entire aspect of a lifestyle and community club,” says Steve Adelson, a partner in Discovery Land Co. “Golf is still the core amenity at many of our communities, but we’ve refined the amenities through health and fitness.

“We have organic farms at a number of our properties where we grow our own food and teach kids about farm to table.

Our fitness centers have top-of-the-line equipment and personal trainers.”

The additional amenities, Adelson says, are the main reasons people are buying into the company’s clubs.

“We have a lot of members who don’t even play golf,” Adelson says.

Additionally, Adelson says family memberships at Discovery Land Co. properties mean just that.

“Your kids are members whether they are 2 or 42,” Adelson says. “The kids are members as long as you are a member. That really makes the clubs multigenerational.”

Steve Pike is an award-winning journalist who has covered the golf and travel industries for more than 25 years for publications such as Golfweek, Links, and Golf Digest magazines. This is his second feature for Club Management.