Balbriggan Golf Club: Initiating a Cadets’ Section

The Issue:
In 2008 it was recognised that children under twelve years old were unable to play golf at Balbriggan Golf Club. It was often the case that once children reach twelve and were able to join the Juniors they had already taken up other sports and did not consider golf as an option.

The Solution:
The Club started a Cadets’ Section which children aged between eight and eleven years were welcome to join. In the first year nine children signed up. They took part in fortnightly hour-long group lessons under a twelve-week programme that took place between June and August. Parents were invited to stay at the Club with their children and were asked to help run the children’s sessions.

A Cadet Committee was established with a minimum of six members. It was agreed that at least three members of this committee would need to attend the weekly cadet session. The reality is that most weeks all six members of the committee turn up.

When the cadets are not taking part in lessons they play a group scramble. One adult accompanies each group of four children on the course. With eighty-six children this requires twenty-five adults, so the Club relies heavily on the help of parents.

Before the cadets’ programme starts each year, Golf Union of Ireland (GUI) runs a course on Child Safety and a Leaders’ course for the Club.

The Club has set in place several child-friendly motivators:
★ Each child is given an annual progress medal, certificate and prize – based on a total spend of €10 per child per year.
★ A Cadet of the Year trophy was purchased and is much sought after!
★ At the end of season prize giving the most Improved Players are named and celebrated.

The cadets also take part in the highly regarded Darren Clarke Skills Challenge at the end of the season. The challenge...
involves chipping and putting from a variety of distances to the green/hole. All clubs that take part are entitled to send their top two qualifying cadets to the Grand Final. To date, Balbriggan’s cadets has supplied three winners in the boys’ category and two from the girls’ category.

The Challenges:
The Club knew that for the cadets’ programme to work, participation from parents would be needed. In the early years of the programme it was difficult to get parents to help on a regular basis. Parents are generally used to dropping their children off at football training and then going back to collect when it’s over! This challenge had to be met head-on, since it was essential for the cadets to have adult supervision on the course.

It was decided to hold a welcome meeting before each season started. At this meeting, the Club explained the need for parental help as well as the benefits of this for the cadets: not all children are happy to be left in an unfamiliar environment to play a new sport. Parents were only too happy to lend their support and most gave their commitment to assist at least three times a year, when asked to do so as part of the application process.

When children started to misbehave at the sessions, it also became clear that some rules were needed! By year two, guidelines for participation were produced and distributed to all families.

With increasing numbers the Club faced added unforeseen problems such as non-members turning up at sessions with their friends, or cadets signing in as if they were full members of the Club. Management and monitoring became especially difficult by 2014 when all but two of the original Cadet Committee had left because their own children had become Juniors, and new committee members were urgently required.

Guidance from GUI was sought, and the new season teed off with a welcome meeting at which a number of parents signed up for training and were enrolled as Committee members. Care was taken to ensure that parents with children of varying ages joined the Committee, to provide greater stability over time. A revamped welcome pack for children and parents was issued at this meeting. All membership payments were taken at the meeting to avoid the later problems of non-payment that had sometimes occurred in previous years.

Over time, as membership of the Cadets’ Section grew to more than eighty, it became necessary to split the section into two and then three separate groups, each with its own team of organisers. Currently, while one or two groups play on the course, the other receives lessons. To accommodate this, and because it was found that four-hour lessons were too long, the Club now runs two sessions of two-hour lessons each week.

Impacts:
In the first year of implementation, nine children joined Balbriggan’s Cadets’ Section. Over the next six years the number of children in this section grew to eighty-six! In line with the growth in demand the Club now provides four hours of group lessons per week to its cadets. Ten children participate in each lesson. A very welcome side effect has been that parents – both men and ladies - often join the Club in their own right. An annual prize-giving night is held for all of the cadets. It is regarded as great fun and another good revenue stream for the Club. Encouraging children into the Club shows the world – and more importantly new and potential members – that Balbriggan is a friendly welcoming club!
Next Steps:
The Club has now implemented a winter coaching programme for the children. It has recognised that - with so many other sports on offer - the children’s interest in golf must be maintained year-round.

This is working very well and the number graduating into the Juvenile Section is increasing all the time. An increasing number of girls are making this transition; the Club believes that this is because they have already made friends with other cadets and don’t feel uncomfortable in the ‘new surroundings’ of the Juvenile Section without parents around to look after their needs. Previously most of the children would have had their first sight of a golf course at twelve years old, but having been cadets they now fit straight in and feel quite at home!

Tips & Advice:
The Cadets programme is all about helping the children to have fun and enjoy the game! The Club stresses the importance of making the experience enjoyable, engaging parents as soon as possible and involving the Club’s Pro.

Another tip from Balbriggan is to teach the parents of the cadets fun games so that they can play them with their children both at the Club and at home.

A final word from Balbriggan Golf Club:
The Chairperson of Balbriggan’s Cadets’ Section is extremely positive about the Club’s experience in implementing such a popular initiative. He is pleased with the wider appeal to adult members and observes that “Members are joining so that their kids can join the cadets; members are staying because their kids are playing; members with grandchildren are bringing them along and also keeping them involved.” He offers a warm welcome to any other clubs that would like to contact or visit Balbriggan Golf Club to take a look at what they are doing.

“Make it fun, fun, fun. Get the parents involved from day one.”

Based on surveys and follow up interviews, the UK and Ireland’s Golf Home Unions have identified and showcased examples of “what works” in golf club management in a series of case studies. The focus has been on clubs that have been successful in achieving more players, more members and stronger clubs. The intention is to share information and guidance on effective practices in business planning, customer service, membership, and women’s and girls’ golf. For further information about this and other case studies and for further support, please go to www.golfcasestudies.businesscatalyst.com.