

# COURSEFOCUS

*The exclusive management by Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club*



## Developing a Private Club with a Proven Membership Process Sticking to the Fine Quality of the Club's Membership System

When most people hear the words “interview” or “face-to-face talk”, they would generally think of a job offer or a consular visa application. These words promote a feeling of being selected or evaluated. Many people would be surprised to learn that an official interview is also necessary when purchasing a golf club membership. The interview system for obtaining a membership is completely strange and new in China, but has been long used by most of the top American clubs, including the Augusta Golf Club. Now, in China, this interview process has been introduced for the first time by the Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club.

As golf becomes more and more popular, and as the number of golf courses continue to increase, market competition is more intense than ever and the sales of memberships is now more dependent on the buyer's market. Potential members are courted before admission and after paying for a membership, they regard themselves as royalty.

The unpleasant consequences of poor performance in playing occur frequently, including slow play, the ruining of fairways and greens by beginners, ignorance of regulations, improper conduct and etiquette, and so on. Even some well-known clubs can't seem to escape

these experiences. How can one properly evaluate the membership of the club if one frequently encounters these offences? Speaking from a global perspective, it is a difficult, nearly impossible task to keep high standards in a climate of fierce competition. Many clubs that have established their position as having an exclusive membership policy have eventually become semi-private clubs as a compromise. Nowadays, rare and precious are those clubs that actually maintain such exclusivity.

During the initial stages of setting up the membership development program, the International Management Group (IMG) clearly appreciated the potential that Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club had to establish one of the top membership systems due to its unique and powerful location and superb facilities. Inspired by this, James T. Quilley, the Operation Director of IMG, ventured to put the interviewing system of members into practice, and further made it clear that Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club would maintain its private club positioning and strict membership policies. John Blanch, the former General Manager, felt that this system was

helpful in harmonizing the relationship between the members and the foreign manager, giving them the feeling of a zero-distance relationship. Meanwhile, members deeply felt the promise of a genuinely exclusive membership system.

The so-called "private club" is not a club owned by one individual, but is instead a club belonging to a small and comparatively private group in which a member is only one person within a group. Self-interest affects others and is affected by others. The maximum advantages to all members aren't achieved by the one-sided, egocentric benefits of a single member. Only by strictly restricting and standardizing the conduct of all members can the peaceful, harmonious sharing of the surroundings be ensured, guaranteeing the interests of each individual.

On November 18, 2005, just before the completion on the establishment of the 27-hole, championship-calibre golf course and the 10,000m<sup>2</sup> clubhouse, the recruitment of the Founding Members had already begun. On that same day, membership interviews were underway. The Membership Admission Committee was comprised of a four-person group: the General Manager, the Assistant General Manager (who is also the Membership Director), the Director of Golf and the Membership Service Manager. They interviewed each applicant, who were only admitted after they had been examined and verified by the Committee.

The nature of the interview was created to achieve a mutual understanding and two-way choice between the club and the applicants, and not as a process in which the club selected applicants and some of the applicants were washed out. In this way, the applicants could better understand and know the regulations of the club, have a better idea of the position of the club, know its management and commitments, know how to cooperate with the management and service team, and allowed them the opportunity of experiencing the club's service before the final confirmation. The interview questions, which were designed to pique the curiosity of the applicants, were well in tune with the operation and man-

agement of the club and focused on the core of how to serve club members better. The interviewers gathered key information about the applicants, such as how they knew about the club, their reasons for wanting to join, their present skill level of golf play, what services had attracted them the most, the scope of the business in their companies, and so on. This prepared the Club for guidance planning for golfing beginners and allowed the Club to enhance the areas of service the club members had attached importance to.

There were certain stipulations that interviewers had to follow during the interviewing process; treating all applicants as equals regardless of status, wealth, and social relations; no one was allowed to purchase the membership after the recruitment activities had closed; and conducting themselves in a serious, earnest manner while also dressing properly for the interview. These strict stipulations did not frighten away any of the applicants. In fact, some Japanese and Korean applicants even arranged a special, overseas trip just for the Interview. Of course, there were some individuals who failed the interview due to certain qualities and behaviours that did not conform to the Club's standards. All successful applicants who became club members were able to follow these proprieties and were responsible for the conduct and behaviour of the honoured guests they invited. Indeed, it was the harmonious atmosphere maintained by the club's members that attracted more qualified individuals to eagerly apply for membership.

During the interviews, the issues that the applicants drew the most attention to were about the com-



**Hole No.4, Links course, Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club**

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mitment and service in reference to the membership system. For example, they commented on the limit of the total number of members and the privileges of members in the daily operations. Some of the basic reasons given for wanting to join Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club were having IMG as the fully-managing group, the excellent, 27-hole golf course designed by a leading, world-class designer, and the world class clubhouse. However, the primary reason provided for wanting to join was the strict membership policy carried out by the golf club, which conformed to the admission standards of the top clubs around the world.

Over the past two years, Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club has completed six phases of new member recruitment. The price of a membership has doubled, but the interview is still conducted from beginning to end, never going through the motions or being shown as just a formality. A large number of members have given enthusiastic feedback and vigorous support. The interview process has become smoother and even more positive. Few applicants fail to join the club as a result of not passing the interview, the examination and verification. As a result, the family of Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club is steadily growing and is well on its way to reaching its membership target. To date, these members come from various areas in China (including Taiwan



### Expanding Classic Traditions and Achieving Incremental Value with a New Process

As the proverb says, “birds of a feather flock together”. This maxim can be visually embodied as a club. As with golf, the club concept originated in Britain during the 17th century, a place where the lords gathered. Since then, it has formed a unique culture in history for centuries. In the traditional British clubs, the majority were to be trained to become gentlemen who had good cultivation, elegant traditions and lofty tastes of life. Possessing a membership to well-known clubs usually indicated an obvious social status. The key expression associated with the culture of the club was “membership system”.

The early clubs of Britain made a strict choice of its applicants. It was through recommendations by qualified members and the votes of two-thirds of the members rather than wealth that would ensure one would obtain membership. The clubs' members usually had similar thoughts on modern society and social status was not the most important factor. However, in order to maintain the image of the club and the overall level of the quality of its members, some traditional practices were reserved in the top clubs of Britain and America to encourage mutual supervision among members and to guarantee the exclusivity of the club. Take for example the system of a black list, which entitled members to take notice of and vote on other members who did not follow the behavioural norms of the club.

“The key to keep the members satisfied is to guarantee the overall benefits of the members, and



and Hong Kong) and other parts of the world such as Korea, Japan, Singapore, France, USA, and Norway.

Around China, golf courses that are designed around beautiful terrain are numerous, as are courses that are built around luxurious, comfortable clubs. What separates the Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club from the rest is not only its greatly varied course, but also its creative management, unique membership admission policies, and persistent pursuit of the highest quality service.

**The exclusive wine & cigar bar - “Player’s Lounge” in the clubhouse, which displays the paintings recording the unforgettable moments and personal credo of Gary Player in his career and life.**



**Links course, Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club.**

to increase the value of the membership by continuously intensifying the purity of the members. In fact, there are always many approaches to intensify the sense of self respect” says Nick Carter, a qualified executive from the USA with many years of experience in managing private, member-only clubs, which helped him develop a unique understanding of the club culture. When he took the post as the General Manager of the Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club this Spring, the system of interviewing, examining and verifying applicants for membership was already in effect and fruitful, with many excellent members already recruited. After fully understanding the development of golf in China and on the basis of the members Nick incorporated a new measure for the golf club to promote the quality of service and to expand the exclusive benefits of its members. It was called the process of “Membership By Invitation” (MBI). This MBI system requires that applicants be invited to the club by existing members and then be interviewed, and approved before being officially accepted to membership. This made it very clear that the Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club had an advanced feature – a pure membership system. This manifested honoured and respected club traditions, and enhanced the intangible value of membership.

A Chinese proverb says, “People of different wills choose different colleagues to cooperate with”.

Whether on or off the golf course, it is an ideal and aspiring ambition that one can cooperate with people of the same will and interests. Staying together with close friends in the same club of top quality, sharing the world-class golf course, professional golf instruction, fine meals and drinks, and enjoying private VIP service...are a pleasant experience! MBI focuses on gathering more people of similar social positions, tastes and sense of worth, while concentrating on the members’ needs, which creates a harmonious environment. In a community with top-grade facilities, the residents have no idea who their neighbours are and have no choice in who their neighbours are. Likewise, with most golf clubs, members do not know who will be their golf friends, and have no say in the matter. MBI has helped change passiveness for free will and the advantages of the members as hosts are better embodied. People of the same will can maintain the high standard of the club, making existing management smoother, which undoubtedly benefits everyone!

On May 15, 2007, the Suzhou Jinji Lake International Golf Club officially introduced the MBI process when it released its fifth phase of memberships. The price of an Individual membership rose to 880,000 RMB and a Corporate membership increased to 1,780,000 RMB. Yet every Phase was completed three weeks earlier than planned! (The Club has recently completed Phase VI.) MBI was embraced by members, many of them having invited their good friends to join the club. One member even recommended five applicants! New applicants gained more confidence in the club via member introductions and by their own experience. Prices based on the quality of service and real values have true worth!

The link between the staggering success of MBI and the original development plan for its establishment is inseparable. The resolute position of the pure membership system, the general management by IMG, the system of interviewing, examining and verifying for obtaining membership, and the MBI policy have all promoted a gradual increase in value of a membership. The club will never stop its progression towards accomplishment and more added-value services are going to continually benefit the members in helping manage the club now and in the future. G