



## 6. DEALING WITH DIFFICULT MEMBERS

Ray Burniston, National Secretary GCMA (now retired), writes about dealing with complaints.

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“I don’t know what we pay our subs for”; “the course is an absolute disgrace, it is the worst in the district”. If you have been a secretary for any length of time you will have received comments like this from aggrieved members. Often they have arrived at the club only to find that the course is closed or some other occurrence is going to adversely effect their game. The fact that there have been notices around for several weeks as well as in the fixture list is quickly overlooked. If you are around they will invariably take it out on you. In some cases you may be able to alleviate the problem by arranging courtesy on a neighbouring course through contact with a colleague. In most circumstances you will have to turn the other cheek.

I can remember been called out of a county AGM by what was described as an urgent phone call, at that time my wife was very shortly to give birth to a baby. (This was in 1973.) I naturally thought this was the case only to hear a member on the telephone complaining to me because I was absent from the club and he wanted a handicap certificate as he was going on holiday in a week’s time. Most of you will be able to recall similar incidents in which members either complained or made requests at an inopportune moment. One secretary told me he was rung up at home around midnight by a member complaining that the clubhouse was shut meaning that he could not see the notice board with the results of the day’s competition.

Recently in this area the police have shown on television non-urgent 999 calls made by members of the public. These included a husband complaining that his wife had not cooked a meal but had been decorating all day and another from a pensioner who had mislaid her reading glasses and could not see to peel her potatoes for her lunch. We could undoubtedly write a book on this subject if we so wished.

One of daftest complaints I had was from an irate husband because his wife had won the Ladies Open the previous day and had forgotten to do the shopping on the way home. The actual truth was that she had celebrated rather too well and had been driven home by another member and was not in a fit state to go shopping at the time. She had sobered up when her husband arrived home and naturally did not want him to know the truth. Fortunately I knew the truth and just sympathized with him hinting at the excitement of winning had brought a temporary loss of memory. This incident impressed on me the need to find out the true facts if at all possible and use your discretion on matters of a personal nature.

Complaints from members can usually be dealt with often on the spot. Often by allowing the member to get it off their chest they then become more amiable and you can often put the answer across. Never meet abuse with abuse. All you will do is to bring yourself down to the same level as the complainant. This can be a problem when a member has been in the 19th hole and is the worst for drink. In these circumstances it is best to suggest that he comes and sees you another day. Try to avoid suggesting he is drunk but if he has friends around then they may help by taking him home for you.

Far more difficult and serious can be a complaint from a visitor or even a member of the public. I once had a case of three visitors setting out on the course in the middle of a major club competition. When I apprehended them they told me that they had called at the professional's shop to pay a green fee but he was at lunch. According to them a member had given them permission to play and they had agreed to pay their fees when they finished. I quietly explained the situation but unfortunately one of them got very aggressive and threatened me with physical violence as well as telling me what I could do with the club. I quickly departed telling them that unless they left the course immediately I would call the police. This was a time when you could easily get hold of a policeman and within ten minutes a police car was in the car park and they were escorted from the club premises. Nowadays if you suspect there may well be trouble it is best to get some help from members or staff.

If you have public footpaths running across the course you will undoubtedly get complaints from time to time. Golfers can be the cause of complaints when they mix with members of the public. Try to deal with the complainant in a fair but firm way. Take details including name and address but remember not to make any decision until you have spoken to both parties. In the event of injuries or damage from golf balls then see that anybody injured receives medical attention and ascertain full facts. Never admit any responsibility but refer the incident to your insurers. Public footpaths should be marked and warning notices displayed for both golfers and the public. This is important for visiting golfers who may not know the course and any areas of potential danger. Good clear signs especially on the tee, are essential so that golfers are made aware of any potential dangers.

### **Check list of points to watch:**

- Always listen carefully to any complaints and deal with them straight away if you can or refer them to the appropriate committee/person.
- Remember in some cases the member will be right, in others they will be at fault, but try not making them look small in front of their friends or fellow members.
- Avoid confrontation if the person is either drunk or likely to be violent, and get help from either staff or members.
- Communicate regularly to members on course closures and other restrictions and in the case of last minute course closure attempt to see that all regulars on that particular day are informed.

- ✉ Never admit anything on complaints involving footpaths or injuries. Take full details and obtain expert advice.
- ✉ On dealing with disputes between members of a personal nature tread very carefully and if possible leave them to sort themselves out. Remember you are not a marriage guidance or family expert.

If you develop a reputation for listening to members and at least in some cases dealing with a justified complaint, you will make an easier life for yourself as well as gaining the respect and confidence of your members.

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