

Up Close and Personal

Chris Schiavone, president of the New Jersey Golf Course Owners Association, talks about the benefits of golf club membership, the next generation of golfers, and who makes the cut in his dream foursome.

By Matt Ward

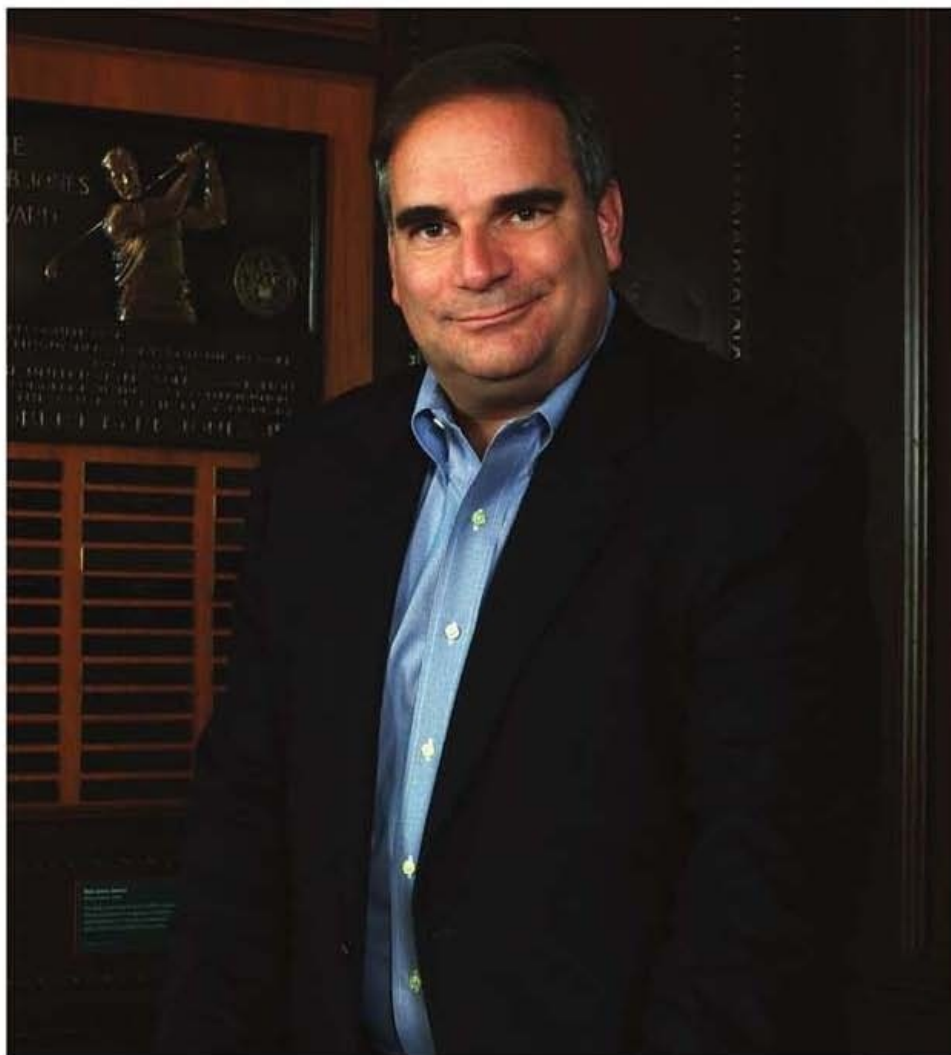
Golf has been in Christopher Schiavone's blood since he was a child. Born and raised in New Jersey, he adopted the lessons learned from his family's 30 years of experience in the golf business and applied those principles to RDC Golf Group, a premier golf management and ownership company.

Schiavone's foray into entrepreneurship began when he co-founded Dartcor Food Service, an owner/operator of corporate food service facilities that was recognized by New Jersey Business Magazine as one of Northern New Jersey's Top 20 Privately Held Corporations. Schiavone's business portfolio expanded when he established RDC in 1993, and he has been the driving force behind the company's significant growth ever since. Schiavone was also recognized as one of the ten most influential people in New Jersey golf by the state's largest daily newspaper, The Newark Star-Ledger.

RDC owns and operates Forsgate Country Club in Monroe Township, N.J., and Tuscawilla Country Club in Orlando, Fla. RDC also leases the private Olde York Country Club in Chesterfield, N.J., and provides management services to New York's Putnam National Golf Course and Tallgrass Golf Club.

How do you see the golf market faring in the Northeast in 2010?

I see 2009 as a likely "bottom" for the market in the region, though we may bump along near that bottom through 2010. There's been talk among a number of experts that golf needs to go through a 15% to 25% reduction in the overall number of courses existing now. The reasoning is supply is totally out of whack with the base number of players.



Do you buy that assertion?

For the near and intermediate term, I agree there is an oversupply of golf relative to demand. Government (counties and municipalities) building courses based on "non-market" motivations is one contributing factor, along with the normal "pendulum effect" of market cycles.

Can a slow game that often costs a good bit connect to the next generation?

Generation X and Y are more focused on "family time" in a safe environment and on physical and emotional health. There is no better place to accomplish all these things simultaneously than at a country club. The pressures of today's high-tech, fast-paced, multi-task society create a greater need than ever to find a relaxing, congenial, back-to-nature recreational

escape, and our industry needs to get this fact to Gen X and Y families.

Sure, it's fine to advocate a county club involvement, but how do most people do that when unemployment is at record highs and the general feeling is golf takes too long to play and costs too much?

We shouldn't try to convince everyone. Golf and country clubs are not the right fit for all, and sadly there are many things the unemployed cannot spend money on today. JFK dealt with a "general feeling" that going to the moon "takes too long and costs too much," and he helped change that perception by emphasizing the benefits. The benefits of golf and club membership can outweigh the costs—chronological and economic—for many.

New Jersey has the eighth most expensive fees to as reported by the NGF. You've taken the strong position opposing taxpayer-subsidized layouts. Do you not think "muni" golf is needed as a pipeline for players who may gravitate to the country club connection you espouse?

No, "muni" or government-owned golf is not needed. Private sector facilities offer affordable golf throughout our state. When you adjust for our cost of living in New Jersey and our relative cost of land—we are the most densely populated state—being ranked eighth makes us relatively inexpensive.

If you had to change one element in the golf industry, what would it be and why?

I don't second-guess the direction free markets take an industry. I would want less government regulation and taxation.

What's your take on the USGA's role with equipment issues? Has their failure to rein in such technology excesses seen with today's clubs and balls only added to the

costs of all facilities as they must add more acreage to accommodate this outcome?

It is all but impossible to go backwards, but they can disallow further improvements in ball flight if they think the technology will eventually require us to build 8,000-yard courses. We don't want those.

There's been discussion in getting golf to fit the 21st-century lifestyle. People talk about a return to executive-style courses or those featuring just 12 holes for faster play. Is there a real future in this?

I doubt it. Having 18 holes doesn't mean you have to play them all every time. Nine-hole rates are common now.

In today's go-go world, can rounds creeping toward six hours really work?

Rounds more than five hours will not work well for most golfers, except for the occasional charity outing. Operators that look at tee-time spacing, ranger programs, course conditions designed to expedite play, etc. can avoid this, especially with rounds

per course being off their peak levels.

Few people know about The Banks Course at Forsgate in Monroe Township, N.J. You own the course and have made it a point to return the course to its days of past greatness. What are your future plans there? Charles Banks designed a unique track at Forsgate, and it's nearly unaltered from its original 1931 routing and layout. In fact, we recaptured the "Biarritz" green two years ago (No. 17) and at 18,000 square feet with a 6-foot deep valley, it is one of the most dramatic greens in the Northeast. We have lengthened the course to address those technology issues referred to earlier, but only to keep Banks' landing areas and design features relevant to today's golfers.

Your dream foursome, including yourself, who's in it?

Mary, Queen of Scots, Old Tom Morris, and William Howard Taft. I'm a history buff, they were all golfers ... plus I wouldn't be the most out of shape in the group! ■



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