Ronneby Golf Club, in Sweden

ALEXEI NOVIKOV/SHUTTERSTOCK

Growing golf in Europe

Alexander Baron von Spoercken is leading the EGCOA's charge to open up golf and grow the game. But it has to figure out how to work with the federations. **BY TREVOR LEDGER**

Earlier this year, Alexander Baron von Spoercken made the trek to Brussels to meet with representatives of the European Union.

The president of the European Golf Course Owners Association was part of a group of other golf stakeholders for what was the first such meeting with the EU.

"In Brussels, we presented a unified industry and concentrated on the economic, social and environmental importance of golf to the countries of Europe," von Spoercken said. "Nobody in Brussels knew that the financial contribution of golf across the EU is in the region of 50 billion euros ($66 billion) and that it employs in excess of 400,000 people. They thought it was a small and somewhat eccentric industry."

It was a good first step by the groups to emphasize golf's economic and social impact across the region.

And von Spoercken, owner of Schloss Ludersburg and chairman of the board of directors of Clubhaus AG, one of the most successful golf course chain operations in Germany, is hopeful the EU will someday formulate and implement directives that will hold power over all of Europe's golf federations. But von Spoercken is under no illusion as to the task that lies ahead.

"Such change will happen over decades, if not longer," he said. "But we have definitely made inroads; the train has left the station as it were."

The EGCOA, which represents for-profit golf courses, is only 8 years old, but it is making inroads as a leader in golf. It represents more than 1,000 golf courses across 13 countries, representing around 30 percent market share.

"We want to increase the professionalism in the golf club industry," von Spoercken said about the group's mission. "Up to now it has largely been run by amateurs — that is not to criticize amateurs who have, for a long time, run the traditional nonprofit clubs. But commercial organizations — the vast majority of new developments across Europe — need to be run by professionals."

But the national federations, which represent the old guard, nonprofit clubs, are holding back the future, he said.

"In many countries across Europe, there is a very strong, traditional golf element that is protected by the national federations, and this is doing little to help promote the growth of golf," he said.

Von Spoercken said these federations protect the older nonprofit clubs. He said commercial clubs are comparatively new and have only been in business for the past 25 to 30 years.

"The situation in Germany, for example, sees golf as a very regulated sport," he said. "All golfers must belong to a golf club and each club must be a member of the national federation [Deutsche Golf Verband]. The DGV then limits the number of golfers artificially."

Von Spoercken, who co-founded the German Golf Course Owners Association, said it would take time before the EGCOA can compete with these monopolies. But he hopes to work with the federations to advance the game.

"We do not want to confront them at all; we want to cooperate and collaborate," he said. "All stakeholders in the golf industry must work together — it is very, very important to try to convince the federations that there is a new development in golf which is different to the traditional nonprofit members' clubs. It is these new developments — commercial golf operations — that allow for real growth of participation, for growth of golf."

"Of course nonprofit organizations are a completely legitimate exercise — not just in golf but in anything — but they cannot be allowed to operate a monopoly," he said. "A competitive disadvantage should not be allowed to exist."

Von Spoercken said the value-added tax situation, in which private member clubs get tax breaks not enjoyed by for-profit outfits, is grossly unfair, but the EGCOA is making progress.

Not every golf course in Europe, however, cares about the value-added tax. The golf industry is as diverse as the countries in the EU.

"You have to look at golf country by country," von Spoercken said. "Some [countries] are experiencing growth. Some are stable and some are declining. In Eastern Europe — Poland and the Czech Republic, for example — the situation is very healthy. The same in Finland. But more mature markets, like Sweden and the U.K., have slowed down considerably. Overall, there has been a slowdown during the last five years. Golf's challenges in Europe are generic and individual: changed consumer behavior, a lingering perception of golf as an elitist sport and an overall reduction in disposable income, von Spoercken said.

Countries should be analyzed individually because each is different, he said. This is the next step for the EGCOA: to reverse the trends of growth slowdown by removing barriers that are holding golf back.

"We all need healthy growth, commercial and nonprofit clubs alike, and to do that we need to intensify the lobby action that is already going on. We need to work together to provide more nine-, six- and even three-hole facilities where time restrictions are not a barrier to playing golf. We also need to change the rules and regulations — not dramatically, just a little — while taking care not to betray the spirit and traditions of this wonderful sport."

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