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Golf Guide 2008: Management whiz turns golf into green**Schickler sets muni empire on profitable course**

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Examine Bill Schickler's long-winding résumé, one that navigates through the entertainment industry before veering off to the golf world, and a common thread appears.

He's a financial guy, a management type, who in his various positions seems to do one thing particularly well: Trim the fat.

Or, in the case of exercise guru Richard Simmons, trim the fit.

"I cancelled his show," Schickler said. "He was not happy. Every show runs its course."

It's ironic the Los Angeles native should use those particular words, because more and more these days it seems as if he runs every course -- at least the public ones dotting the Puget Sound corridor.

As president of Premier Golf Centers, Schickler, 59, manages operations for 10 municipal facilities, a weighty list that includes Seattle's Interbay, Jackson Park, Jefferson Park and West Seattle, Everett's Legion Memorial and Walter Hall, Bellevue, Lake Wilderness, Lake Spanaway and Fort Steilacoom.

Even before the economy started to regularly swing and miss, golf was in a decade-long financial funk, with the exception of courses that had connections to Schickler.

"It's fair to say we've been outperforming the market," he said, pointing to customer service and intense marketing efforts for making it happen.

There's no better example than the recent performance of the quartet of Seattle courses, which have bounced back under the combined leadership of Andy Soden, the city's director of golf, and Schickler, whose management services are contracted by the city.

The courses are nearing a collective 300,000 yearly rounds again, a total not generated since 1991, after dipping to a low of 191,000 in 2003.

While Soden makes sure the courses are properly maintained and refurbished in stages, Schickler has been entrusted with reclaiming all those lost golfers who fled the city for somewhere else to play and keeping them happy.

One way to generate interest was Schickler's creation of the Premier Club, a knockoff approach to accruing frequent flier miles.

For every golf dollar spent, 10 points is earned. Reach 1,000 points, and a five-percent discount kicks in on green fees, carts and range balls, with discounts climbing as high as 20 percent.

"It's been extremely successful," said Schickler, who has 20,000 golfers enrolled for free as club members.

"He brings a lot of different management techniques to a game that needs a real serious business acumen," Soden said.

"He's been very helpful, a great partner. It's a good marriage."

Schickler, an alumnus of Cal State-Northridge, always has had astute business instincts. He spent a dozen year in the

entertainment business, first handling finances for legendary actor Gene Autry before engaging in a leveraged buyout of an Autry company, Golden West Television, and then managing that business. It was in the latter capacity that he made the unpopular decision to oust the irreverent Simmons from the airwaves.

From there, Schickler became chief financial officer for (Chuck) Barris Industries, which counted the "Newlywed Game" and "Dating Game" among its broadcast offerings.

Schickler, a 10 handicap player, couldn't resist the golf boom of the late 1980s, and left TV and radio behind to make money on fairways and greens. He went from building driving ranges in concert with Jack Nicklaus to joining Family Golf Centers that would design and construct Interbay among its 125 properties and go bankrupt to creating Premier Golf Centers.

"The entertainment business is very marketing oriented, and a lot of the same concepts carry over to golf," said Schickler, whose bid beat out Casper, Kemper and Oki management companies to win the Seattle contract.

Schickler, though he lives with his wife in a Lake Union houseboat a few piers down from the one that Tom Hanks made famous in "Sleepless in Seattle," doesn't have a Hollywood persona. There are no gold chains or permanently affixed sunglasses, just an easy going yet firm manner.

Thanks to this man's sharp business practices, the Seattle courses are making money again, popular again, trendy again, after nearly meeting Richard Simmons' fate and disappearing from view.

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