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Why tee time at Salem's Kernwood CC isn't just for Jews anymore



by **Steve Marantz** — January 20, 2022 in [News](#)



Jack King celebrates a hole-in-one at Kernwood.

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In the photograph, Jack King's smile is that of a golfer triumphant. He's on the 12th green of Kernwood Country Club, after his first and only hole-in-one. His is a radiant smile, of someone who knows that golf's most precious reward is paid for in routine frustration.

There's a story behind King's smile. As with most smiles, it begins with his dentist, Dr. Howard Rosenkrantz. With King in for an exam in 2004, Rosenkrantz posed a question.

"Jack, why don't you join Kernwood?"

King was caught off guard. Kernwood Country Club in Salem was a historically Jewish private club, established in 1914 by Jewish businessmen who were excluded from other clubs in the region. King was an Irish-Catholic who grew up in blue-collar Lynn, a graduate of St. Mary's School and West Point.

"Mmmph?" he replied, with a dental tool in his mouth.

Rosenkrantz continued, "We're trying to diversify membership. I'll sponsor you."

A couple of years later, when King retired from a career in the military and oil/gas industry, he and his wife, Mary, decided to join a club. They considered Tedesco in Marblehead and Salem Country Club – both historically gentile clubs – before taking Rosenkrantz up on his offer.

"I had consulted with my childhood friends, avid golfers, who told me Kernwood was the most beautiful course on the North Shore," King recalled. Kernwood's active women golfers enhanced its appeal to his wife, as did the swimming pool and tennis courts.



Golfers practice at Pine Brook in Weston. Photo: Facebook

King went before Kernwood's membership committee and was admitted. Later, after he had learned more about the club, King thought back to his dental exam and Rosenkrantz's invitation.

"When he said, 'We're trying to diversify membership,' I didn't realize he meant religiously," said King. "No one told me that when I joined."

When King became a member in 2006, Kernwood had less than 10 non-Jews among 250 golf members, he recalled. In 2014, Kernwood's centennial year, King was elected as its first non-Jewish president. Today, 50 percent of the club's golf membership is non-Jewish.

The transformation was part of Kernwood's campaign to survive the Great Recession of 2008-2010. About 75 Jewish members were forced to leave, a few of them hurt by Bernard Madoff's \$50 billion Ponzi scheme, recalled former president Michael Finn. The club was at an economic precipice.

"Up to that point, non-Jews didn't want to join because Kernwood was so heavily Jewish and they felt they wouldn't be accepted," Finn said. "So we made a conscious decision to attract a wider group of non-Jews. We had a gorgeous club with amenities – we just had to reach out."

A few older Jewish members pushed back, Finn recalled, because they resented the historical bias of non-Jewish clubs.

"But gradually these old Jewish members realized that the new non-Jewish members were nice people," Finn said. "They weren't trying to replace the Jews – they were just trying to be actively supportive."

"I had enormous support from the older Jewish membership," King recalled. "After I was elected [president], one of the older members told me at a social event, 'Jack, this is the best thing to happen to Kernwood in a generation.'"



A Kernwood member practices putting.

As bastions of affluence, private golf clubs provide an opaque window into influential elites, who pay initiation fees that range from \$10,000 to \$100,000, and annual expenses upward of \$15,000.

From the game's beginnings in the late 19th century, golfers socialized at private clubs defined by wealth, ethnicity, and religion. The Country Club in Brookline, founded in 1882, was among America's first, and modeled the restricted membership – Yankee, Protestant, and Brahmin – successive clubs readily embraced. Over the next few decades, the Irish and Italian Catholic clubs and the Jewish clubs were established. Golfers of color – in fewer numbers – were on the outside, at public courses.

The history of Jewish golf clubs in Massachusetts starts with Kernwood, which opened in 1915, and runs through Pine Brook in Weston, 1924; Blue Hill in Canton, 1925; Belmont in 1943; and Spring Valley in Sharon in 1961.

Jewish clubs thrived throughout the 20th century because gentile clubs remained restricted, with token exceptions.

The private Jewish club became embedded in Jewish-American identity, as both an emblem of upward mobility and a middle finger to clubs historically restricted to gentiles. Consider fictional Green Lane Country Club in Philip Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus," where lunch-pail visitor Neil Klugman first eyes sleek and privileged Brenda Patimkin. To Klugman, all-Jewish Green Lane and Brenda represented the 1950s suburban idyll.

In 1962 the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith issued the first-ever report on nationwide religious discrimination by social clubs. Of 803 country clubs surveyed, 224 were nondiscriminatory. Of the other 579, 505 were "Christian country clubs," 416 of which barred Jews completely. The other 89 had a quota. Seventy-four of the 579 discriminating clubs were Jewish. Seventy-one of these barred Christians completely, and the remaining three accepted them "in small numbers."

Famously, former Reebok CEO Paul Fireman, who grew up Jewish in Brockton, claimed to have been rebuffed in the mid-1980s by snooty Oyster Harbors Club in Osterville. He told *The Boston Globe* in 1994, "It's a fully restricted club ... if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, chances are it is a duck." Fireman's response was to buy a distressed semi-private club in Mashpee, rebuild it as Willowbend Country Club, and open its membership to Jews, gentiles, Blacks, Asians, and women in 1992.

Today, Kernwood's metamorphosis reflects economic reality, and perhaps nothing so much as Jewish assimilation, according to a former club president. "Intermarriage alone has opened up feelings about where people are," said Steve Wilchins. "The reality is that people are accepting of different cultures in work life, in marriages, and it's becoming pretty normal. It's way different than it was 50 or 60 years ago."

Assimilation, Bradley Klein wrote in *Golfweek* in 2009, persuaded historically restricted gentile clubs to open their ranks to Jews: "The shrinking pool of candidates for all-Jewish clubs, in turn, forced such facilities to seek a secular, more diverse membership," he wrote.

Kernwood's decision to recruit non-Jewish members was mirrored by Blue Hill. Though private clubs are not required to disclose membership data, Blue Hill is now 40 percent Jewish, according to a member. The club's current owner-operator, Concert Golf Partners, bought Blue Hill in 2015 as the club struggled with debt of about \$5 million. Concert Golf, which owns golf clubs nationwide, posted a case study of the financial spiral, which included this passage: "Each year, the board would set a target for new member recruitment and an assumption about member attrition. And each year (with the rising dues rates, the deferred capital projects and the perception that the club was all-Jewish) fewer members joined and more members departed than the board had planned. So the following year dues rates simply had to be increased on the existing membership base to make ends meet."

Belmont, Pine Brook, and the former Spring Valley (now The Cape Club of Sharon), declined or did not respond to requests to be interviewed. Belmont's non-Jewish membership is about 25 percent of 350 members, according to a member who requested anonymity. Pine Brook reportedly was rocked by Madoff's scheme because a club member was Madoff's key recruiter.

On the flip side are historically gentile clubs whose admission attitudes are arguably more open than in the past. “All different ethnic groups are welcome at all these clubs,” said journalist/historian Gary Larrabee, a respected chronicler of North Shore golf. “Nothing goes by religion anymore in this area. Clubs known for specificity of membership have all become diverse to some degree.”

Tedesco Country Club, which straddles the Swampscott-Marblehead line, was an exclusionary enclave from its founding in 1903 until approximately 1970, when it admitted its first Jew, the late Dr. Greg Alexander. “That’s where his Salem Hospital friends played, and he was a guest so many times that finally he was induced to join,” said his son, Dr. Richard Alexander, who also became a Tedesco member. “He didn’t think of it as a social breakthrough; it was a matter of convenience. He always felt well-accepted there.”



Salem Country Club in Peabody now accepts Jewish members.

Tedesco’s management declined to provide membership data, or comment on its exclusionary history. But today it has 12 to 15 Jews among 300 golf members, sources said. One Jewish member, requesting anonymity, cited “convenience” as a reason for choosing Tedesco over Kernwood. Said one Tedesco member: “I have a strong group of friends and no sense of being an outsider.” He added: “Jewish culture to me is more about families getting together, rather than the religion aspect, and in my generation that’s happening with non-Jews. Which plays into why this is happening at the clubs. Religion is not even a question.”

Salem Country Club in Peabody, which flourished as an Irish-Catholic enclave for decades, declined to discuss its membership diversity. A longtime member, Dr. John Fallon, said Salem has “more than a few” Jewish members. “There are a lot of Germanic names that could be Jewish, but nobody has made a count, as far as I know,” said Fallon. “I was on the membership committee and I don’t recall any scuttlebutt about religion or anybody saying we don’t want Jewish members.”

Tedesco, in Swampscott, has an estimated 12-15 Jewish members. Photo: Facebook

Assimilation is personified by Fallon and his significant other, Emily Watt. After losing his wife to ALS, Fallon met Watt, who is Jewish and had belonged to an all-Jewish club in Scarsdale, N.Y. “When Emily came with me to Salem about eight years ago, she was concerned if somebody found out she was Jewish,” said Fallon. “But nothing has ever happened, and nobody has ever made a comment, to make her feel uncomfortable.”

Some Jewish observers remain circumspect about the attitudes of historically gentile clubs. “In no way have they opened up,” said Finn, the former Kernwood president. “They have token Jewish membership. In the not-too-distant past, the discrimination was covert if not overt. Then they started having one or two Jews. In some sense it’s a dollar-and-cents game – they don’t need Jewish members. In another sense it’s a discrimination game.”

The eclipse of all-Jewish golf clubs invariably comes with degrees of cultural angst and regret. Martin Caller, a former president of the Association of Jewish Golf Clubs and Societies in England, wrote in 2010: “We will lose something special if the Jewish golf clubs go. The rarefied atmosphere and like-mindedness of Jewish people in a club culture, the banter. It will be a great shame too for Jewish charities who host fund-raising days at the club and so make the club a good community resource.”

Kernwood has shed aspects of its Jewish cultural identity, said James New, a longtime member and former club secretary. It no longer hosts a charity golf tournament for the Jewish Federation of the North Shore, which merged with Combined Jewish Philanthropies in 2013. Nor does it close on the high holidays.

“Back in the day, we were closed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur,” said New. “Gradually, as the club changed, we began to open on holidays because there were enough non-Jews to play on those days.”

Now, Kernwood hosts a spring brunch that coincides with Passover and Easter, and a December brunch that celebrates Hannukah and Christmas.

“You could say we have become ecumenical, recognizing the diversity of our membership,” said New. “Kernwood has really just evolved as a great collection of people who enjoy golf, have developed new friendships, and just get along. It’s evolved in a good way, by most perspectives.”

Jack King, 73, who served as president for two years, points out that while Kernwood has evolved socially, it retains the philanthropic ethos that characterized its all-Jewish era, with annual donations of about \$400,000. A fundraiser that brought 25 disabled veterans to Kernwood in September 2018 was the occasion of King’s hole-in-one.

“If you have been so blessed you can belong, you have an obligation to share with others less fortunate,” King said. “That’s a core value of Kernwood that continues to this day. It’s one of the things that attracted my wife and I to this club.”

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