

It takes a corporate village to raise a U.S. Open

by *Tod Leonard*

SAN DIEGO - Before she'd ever seen the Torrey Pines golf courses, Mimi Griffin, the woman who has staged the U.S. Open's biggest parties since 1995, knew well of Southern California's reputation as a quirky, laid-back, spoiled and sometimes indifferent sports market.

So when Griffin came to San Diego in May 2005 to begin sort of a corporate hospitality pep rally for the 2008 U.S. Open at Torrey Pines, she didn't know what to expect.

It had been 60 years since Southern California had hosted an Open, and the last major held around here, the '95 PGA at Riviera in Los Angeles, had been something of a corporate and ticket sales dud.

"I wasn't sure how quickly people would get on board," Griffin admitted.

What transpired turned out to be fairly stunning.

With two years having passed and still one to go before the Torrey Open arrives, all the sales records are being broken. Griffin's company, MSG Promotions, and the U.S. Golf Association are offering more than \$20.5 million in hospitality options at Torrey Pines, and nearly half of that already has been sold.

The Grille at The Lodge at Torrey Pines was going for \$545,000, not including food and beverage. It's sold out.

The Charles Reiffel Room in the Lodge: \$520,000. Sold out.

The Gamble Suite in the Lodge: \$332,500. Sold out.

The Ocean Village on the fourth hole of the North Course, where each 40-by-40-foot tent goes for \$210,000: Sold out.

"It has gone extremely well," Griffin said. "We are at or beyond any other Open in terms of general inventory

sales and gross dollar sales. People were really starved for something like this, and they have really embraced the opportunity."

"It has been terrific, as good as it gets," said Pete Bevacqua, the USGA's managing director for all U.S. Opens.

The Open by which all other Opens will be judged - at least before Torrey Pines - is the 2002 event at Bethpage Black on Long Island that generated enormous interest because it was the first Open to be staged on a state-operated facility where everyday golfers regularly played.

Bethpage smashed attendance records, drawing 297,500 fans for the week, and Golfweek magazine reported the gross earnings likely exceeded \$100 million for the nonprofit USGA, which uses the money to stage all of its other championships and support its golf programs.

There was an enormous city of 78 hospitality tents at Bethpage that cost as much as \$175,000 apiece.

At Torrey Pines, the first municipal course to host an Open, there will be about 60 tents in three villages on the North Course (many of them going for \$210,000 each for the week), but there are 11 other hospitality areas, mostly situated in the Lodge, that well exceed \$175,000.

The USGA had to consider myriad factors before awarding the Open to Torrey Pines, but what immediately caught its eye - beyond the Rees Jones redesign of the South Course - was the proximity to the course of the two hotels - the renovated Lodge and the Torrey Pines Hilton. There had never been a situation like it, considering most Opens had been staged in the isolation of gated and private country clubs.

"Totally unique," Griffin said.

Negotiations with the two properties were said to have gotten tough and heated at times, but when a deal was struck in late 2002, it would mean a huge windfall for all sides. The USGA secured high-end hotel rooms in the Lodge for a cut rate, and it got hospitality areas at both hotels that overlook the South Course's 18th hole and the ocean. There won't be a single grandstand built that will block their view.

The hotels will get untold publicity from a week's worth of camera shots during golf's Super Bowl and the rights on the food and beverages served on their property.

"They are a huge part of this Open," Bevacqua said. "Using the hotels in connection with the Open takes it to the next level. It would be tough to have a U.S. Open of this magnitude at Torrey Pines without them. It would be almost impossible."

How big has this Open business become? Griffin said there were about 26 corporate tents available at her first Open in 1995 at Shinnecock Hills in Southampton, N.Y.

"Oh my God, '95 was a great Open, but it was a sleepy little Open compared to what we're talking about now," Griffin said. "The U.S. Open exploded when Tiger Woods exploded (in 1997). At the '98 Open at Olympic Club (in San Francisco) things went crazy."

Some of America's largest corporations have become faithful followers of the Open, no matter where it's staged, but Griffin admits San Diego carries a much larger cachet.

"It's not just a U.S. Open; Torrey Pines and San Diego are destinations," Griffin said. "There's an opportunity for an entertainment experience that you can't normally get in other areas, such as Pittsburgh (site of this year's Open at Oakmont).

"Not to say that there's anything wrong with Pittsburgh," the Allentown, Pa., resident added with a laugh.

Bevacqua estimates about 30 percent to 40 percent of the hospitality clients at Torrey Pines will be national companies, but said that there has been bigger-than-usual interest among San Diego and Southern California entities.

"The local response is the key, and it has been tremendous," he said.

The USGA has a policy of not disclosing its corporate clients, but there will be a wide variety of San Diego businesses occupying hospitality space, including the San Diego Union-Tribune, which has reserved a spot.

The Barona Indian tribe dived into the Open with gusto and a very large check. Already in the golf business with its Barona Creek Golf Club, which will host this year's Nationwide Tour Championship, tribe representatives attended one of the first sales meetings in '05 and snatched up the Lodge's Grille, at \$545,000 the Open's priciest property.

Linda Devine, Barona's assistant general manager for sales and marketing, said the tribe will use the hospitality venue to reward its most coveted casino players, as it does with tickets to the Super Bowl and skybox opportunities at Padres and Chargers games.

"It's the biggest event in the world, as far as golf goes, and it's in our own back yard," Devine said. "It's all about the experience we provide our guests, and we think they're really going to enjoy it. It's obviously worth the money."

For its half-million, Barona gets the use of the entire indoor Grille restaurant that seats 90 and its patio, 150 weekly badges, an option to buy 100 more tickets, 75 preferred parking passes and access for 12 executives or guests to play the South Course sometime before the Open.

The perks vary by plan, but in all, corporate guests will compose as many as 13,000 of the more than 40,000 fans on site each day. They'll use 8,450 preferred parking passes, and get 284 individual golf outings on the South sometime before the Open.

As for the corporate procrastinators out there, Bevacqua said there is still hope. Tables at the Hilton that seat 12 and sell for \$43,000, including food and beverage, might be available until next spring.

"We'll probably be selling tables into the first couple weeks of May," he said.

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