

# Ladies Get Into Golf Success



In 2022, Benalla Golf Club in north-east Victoria was battling an ailment familiar to many regional golf clubs across Australia – an aging demographic and dwindling or stagnating female membership.

According to club secretary Pat Claridge, the review of membership highlighted that just 20 percent of playing members were female. The average age of the female golfers was 72.7 years with only four players under 60 and of the 25 junior members, only one was female.

“It was obvious that drastic action was needed to grow the female membership and in particular attract younger members to ensure the continuation of women’s golf in Benalla,” Claridge said.

But this story has a brighter side. Back in 2022, with assistance from Golf Australia, the club was in the process of formulating a new strategic plan. One of the central pillars was a commitment to implement a range of strategies to get more women playing golf and to create more opportunities for women in leadership roles within the club.

Research revealed a number of barriers that might prevent women and girls from participating or fully engaging in golf:

- an overestimation of the skill levels required;
- the time commitment required for game play;
- cost of equipment and membership;

- perception of a male-dominated, competitive sport culture;
- anxiety over lack of knowledge of dress codes, rules and course etiquette;
- a dearth of younger female players.

The club went to work at addressing the issues.

Pat Claridge said: "Understanding these obstacles dictated the design of a program that would be attractive, accessible, affordable and would hopefully lead to more women playing golf.

"It included varied time slots to accommodate differing lifestyles and commitments; all equipment provided and free access to the course initially, followed by attractive trial membership; support and mentoring from current club members.

"We also started a structured program with professional coaching to establish basic skills and build self-confidence, progressing through shorter, fun versions of the game in a relaxed environment, to a gradual introduction to competitive golf when players felt they were ready."

The initial Get Into Golf for Women and Girls program at Benalla was in October 2022. Since, the club has run six sessions and attracted 120 participants, with more than 40 taking up membership and more than 30 applying for GA handicaps.

Claridge, who also coordinates the program, said: "The infusion of female members, many of a younger demographic, has resulted in remarkable changes in the club both culturally and organisationally.

"The average age of women members has decreased by 10 years, to 62.5 years. A number of the new female members have encouraged husbands, partners and offspring to sign up, resulting in a boost to overall membership."

The club now has three mixed competitions every week in addition to dedicated men's and women's competitions, and Claridge said that after-game socialisation had markedly increased with more members mingling and staying for longer.

Benalla's new women members are making significant contributions to leadership and volunteering.

The club's 2022 strategic plan advocated a change in governance from a 15-member committee (at that time made up of 13 men and two women) to a board of seven with a minimum of two women.

The current board is made up of two men and four women, and of the four women, two are Get into Golf graduates, one being the current President, Nola Jensen.

Get into Golf graduates also make up a large percentage of the club's membership and marketing committee assisting with social media, newsletter production, sponsorship and special events.

Some are now giving back to the Get into Golf program by acting as mentors to new female beginner golfers.

Claridge said Benalla was particularly proud of Get Into Golf graduate Poppy de Winne, who graduated from the first GIG program in 2022 at the age of 12 and who recently won the women's club championship boasting just two years' experience. De Winne also mentors new golfers and is giving back to the club.

Claridge said Benalla had been transformed on a number of levels: "Prior to the Get into Golf program, it felt like we had two separate clubs – a men's club and a women's club. There were few occasions where males and females played together. Even the after-game socialising was segregated with men and women sitting at separate tables.

"With the infusion of a younger female demographic and the family and friends they have brought with them, these barriers have been swept away. There is a warmer and more welcoming atmosphere both on and off the course, more mingling, fun and laughter.

"We have even had a few romances!"

For more on the club, go to [www.benallagolfclub.com.au](http://www.benallagolfclub.com.au)