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Expat Golf League Blends Business and Pleasure

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John Oxenham savoring his win at the Le Meridien Moscow Country Club. **Igor Tabakov**

NAKHABINO, Moscow Region — Alexander Smirnov, clad in yellow pants and a checkered blue and red sweater, looked up angrily as he swung his golf club. A couple was talking quietly nearby in the lush green grass at a golf course in the Le Meridien Moscow Country Club.

"He really doesn't like it when people talk when he is making the shot," explained Scott Baker, managing director of positioning device provider Topcon Positioning Systems and co-founder of a male-only expat golf league that meets at the country club to play.

Keeping quiet as a player prepares to hit the ball is golf etiquette. Although Smirnov was substituting for an absent league player, he took the game seriously.

This 32-member, eight-team league, although unofficial and formed among friends — expatriate businessmen golfers from across the world, including the United States, Britain,

Denmark, Israel and South Korea — has some severe rules. If a player has to miss a game, he needs to find someone who plays on his level to take his place and pay a fee of 1,000 rubles ($30). No-shows are fined 5,000 rubles.

A scandal erupted after the final game of the season last Sunday, when players realized a team member who claimed to miss the game because of a business trip to Kazakhstan was really on vacation in Egypt. Brit John Oxenham, the business development director of Officescape Russia, who won Sunday's game, sent him angry text messages from the team after downing a couple of beers.

Games take place regardless of the weather, come rain or shine. Women are not allowed to join, and a player is fined 2,000 rubles for having a woman at his table during the mandatory post-game gathering on the veranda of the country club's restaurant.

"Unsociable" behavior, such as not showing up to the post-game veranda gathering, not paying fines and not participating in "general banter" costs 1,000 rubles. Any abuse of the course, staff or other players or throwing clubs costs 500 rubles. Throwing clubs more than 50 meters results in a 2,000 ruble fine.

Some penalties have creative names: Sending two shots into the bunker is called Adolf Hitler and costs 100 rubles. Saddam Hussein is going from bunker to bunker and costs 100 rubles. Tranny, or not making it past the lady tees, costs 100 rubles.

The game does not come cheap either. Each member pays a 169,000 ruble annual fee to play golf at the club and must pay an additional 3,000 ruble fee for entry to the league. Compared with American and European country and golf clubs, the Le Meridien Moscow Country Club is expensive, league members said.

Two years ago, Baker and another American member, Greg Oztemel, the owner of Zao Sage, a medical supplies distributor, formed the league to spice up the golf games that were played at the club. "Club tournaments were stagnant, the same people were playing all the time," Baker said.

Baker and Oztemel sent out e-mails to other members of the country club and friends they thought might be interested. The league holds nine games per season at the Moscow Country Club, which has the only 18-hole championship golf course in Russia. At the end of each season, the league throws a big party at Katie O'Shea's pub, owned by one of the league members, where the winning team receives a trophy shaped like a samovar.

The game brings the members closer together, members said. Each Sunday the players spend at least four hours on the golf course, talking business, supporting each other and joking. "It's good competition. We get together and have fun, laugh at people not paying the fines, wisecrack," Oztemel said. "This is my dacha."

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