

by PAT JONES

# IT PLAYS IN Peoria

## Making integrated facility management more than just lip service

**T**here's no question the traditional American private golf club currently is more vulnerable than a baby bunny in a cage full of hungry pythons.

Though the number of golf courses has increased almost 40 percent during the past two decades, the number of private facilities is actually just about the same – about 4,500. That means for every new club that's opened, another has converted to a semiprivate or daily-fee facility, or simply ceased to exist. The golf boom has been a public phenomenon, and clubs have been the victim of the free market.

Society, too, has changed. The days of dad visiting the club four or five days a week to play golf, hang out and spend money are over. And mom's not playing as much golf or sitting in for bridge games every Tuesday and Thursday. She's either working or running the local PTA. The kids? Well, instead of being "club rats," they're busy playing video games, cram-

ming for the SAT, surfing on MySpace.com or going to lacrosse, dance or soccer practices.

So, how does a traditional private club – historically run "the way we've always done it" with almost separate operations in maintenance, food and beverage, and the pro shop – survive in this hostile environment? Two words: teamwork and creativity.

Clubs throughout America are reinventing themselves because, quite simply, they have to. One traditional private facility – the Country Club of Peoria in Illinois – is breaking the mold, becoming more businesslike and taking its destiny into its own hands. As the old show biz saying goes: If it plays in Peoria, it'll play anywhere.

### TYPICAL CLUB, UNIQUE STAFF

The Country Club of Peoria is a classic Midwestern gem. Formed 110 years ago, the club sits near the Illinois River on an

unusually hilly spot in an otherwise flat-as-a-pancake part of the nation.

Like many century courses, the club has undergone numerous development phases, expansions and redesigns through the years. The core design of the golf course is credited to F.M. Birks, one of the club's organizers, but the course was rebuilt dramatically in 1997. It's short (6,200+ yards), tight and woody.

And, like many mature clubs in smaller markets, the facility began feeling the pinch of economic pressures, particularly as the fortunes of Caterpillar – the region's dominant employer – rose and fell. At the same time, membership and revenue declined because of the social challenges facing all clubs.

That was the situation facing the management team that came together in 2005: golf course superintendent Andrew Morris, general manager Mark Bado, CCM, and golf professional Scott Brownfield.

"Before I came here, I worked for an ac-



At the Country Club of Peoria in Illinois, golf course superintendent Andrew Morris (right), general manager Mark Bado, CCM, (below left) and golf professional Scott Brownfield have worked well together to increase membership and find new revenue sources. Photos: Terry Farmer





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## FACILITY OPERATIONS



The golf course irrigation system needed to be replaced, and that tied to the club's need to host golf outings to generate more revenue. Photo: Country Club of Peoria

counting firm in Pittsburgh that handled club business," Bado says. "With that background, I learned how important it is to open yourself to the whole operation. I never knew there were walls between departments at some clubs, so it was natural for the three of us to team up."

Morris also has a nontraditional background for a superintendent. It's his second career after serving as an executive chef at SeaWorld in San Diego and working in restaurant management.

"Obviously, my experience helps me have a much better understanding of the food-and-beverage side, but I also got indoctrinated in management cultures that emphasized teamwork," he says.

Brownfield has been at the club almost continuously for about 20 years and, obviously, had seen numerous management and leadership changes.

"But I immediately liked these guys," he says. "It was easy to get excited about doing new things."

### THE "TO DO" LIST

The new things that needed to be done in-

cluded reversing the decline of memberships, finding new revenue sources, replacing an aging and unreliable irrigation system and making the club more family-friendly in the modern sense.

"Clubs can no longer be a one-stop just for the head of the household," Bado says. "We have to cater to the whole family. Twenty-five percent of our members have been here 30 years or more, but another 25 percent have been here three years or less. We have to meet all of those differing expectations and needs. Essentially, we have to be an extension of the home."

The first order of business building the team and accomplishing its multiple goals was setting up better lines of communication within the entire staff.

"We (the managers) meet weekly on a formal basis, but daily on an informal basis," Brownfield says. "We made a conscious attempt to work as a team."

Morris – who will conduct a seminar about the subject of team management at the GCSAA national conference in Anaheim – outlines his staffwide communication program:

- Weekly management team meetings



- Weekly meeting with the PGA pro
- Weekly meeting with the general manager/facility manager
- Daily meeting with the maintenance crew
- Daily communication with the support staff and assistants
- Ongoing communication with green committee and golf membership
- Facility communication board.

"A big part of our success has been letting each other into each others' areas," Morris says. "I have a better understanding what they do, and we've developed a level of trust. If they tell me things are OK, I know things are OK. We don't always agree, but we'll agree to disagree and laugh about it later."

One might question whether that threatens Morris' autonomy over the turf program.

"One thing I hear superintendents say is 'why would you share that information with them,' like somehow they don't want their g.m. or golf pro to know what they do. That's the complete opposite of what we should be doing. I let him know everything. He doesn't want my job. The more he knows about me and my operation, the better off we'll be.

## Team character

**G**olf course superintendent Andrew Morris has looked beyond his own operation to prepare for his presentation about integrated team management at the GCSAA education conference. He identified these key characteristics of a good team:

- The majority usually consists of fewer than 10 members.
- It strives for something greater than team members could achieve individually.
- Members are accountable with and to their teammates.
- Members have the ability to engage in constructive conflict or agree to disagree.
- Members have commitment and trust in each other.

(Katzenbach and Smith, Harvard Business Review, 2004)

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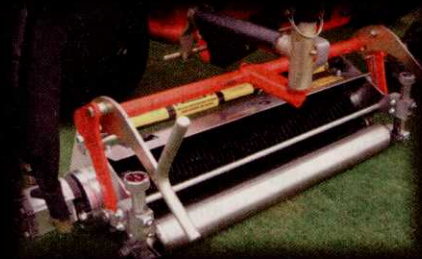
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By hosting 13 new events, the club raised \$750,000 for the community and exposed hundreds of golfers to the course and club. Photo: Country Club of Peoria

That information sharing is a huge part of our success.”

#### HIGH-TECH MARKETING

To address the need to recruit new members, this granddaddy of a club used a new-fangled idea: They produced a membership package that includes a slick DVD that focuses on the people and culture of the club. Surprisingly, it was Morris who wrote the script and helped drive the production.

“Potential members used to get two pieces of paper stapled together,” Morris says. “It just wasn’t representative of the type of club we are. Now we have a nice package to give to potential

members. Most of the time a superintendent would never have been involved, but Mark and Scott were more than willing to listen. I wrote the rough presentation and the dialogue and even presented some of the initial ideas to the board. We got professionals involved to clean it up and put some shine on it.”

Bado loved it.

“Andy really got engaged in the process,” he says. “He captured things about the club that the rest of us might not have understood as well.”

The DVD campaign was a roaring success, and the club attracted 52 new members at the standard initiation fee of \$22,000.

But, the new approach didn’t stop once the new member signed on the dotted line.

“When people join a club, it’s a huge commitment of money and time,” Bado says. “Part of our orientation is for members to go around to each department to meet the people who

might be serving them for the next 20 or 30 years. They meet everyone. They can put a face to a name and a name to a face.”

Brownfield agrees: “It puts a personal touch on the operation,” he says. “They feel much more comfortable using the facility. It can be a little intimidating, but it should feel like an extension of the home.”

Bado sums it up: “Clubs will go the way of the dinosaur unless they’re dynamic,” he says. “As a club, we have to change. It’s like grocery stores. In the ’70s, you just got your milk and meat there. Now, you have banks, ATMs, videos, etc. We have to be a one-stop shop for all of our members’ needs. So, we have wi-fi, a business center, etc. We have to embrace change without losing track of what makes clubs an extension of the home.”

#### OPENING THE DOORS

The club had historically avoided hosting



Between new revenue from member recruitment and the outside events, the club could now afford the new irrigation system.

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outside events, but times had changed and new non-dues revenue was needed. Morris, Brownfield and Bado put their heads together to sell the idea to the membership.

"We needed an irrigation system and really had to market the idea (of more outings) to our members," Bado says. "Instead of sitting on the sidelines and waiting for things to happen, we put some really nice Power-Point presentations together to educate our members.

"Scott and I got leads from the membership," he adds. "And, with Andy's help, we reached out to event managers and created these outings that didn't exist three years ago. Once we sold them on holding the event here, we guided them through the process: how to set it up, how to get golfers, logistics, members, etc. We attend their committee meetings. We're active participants. We even help with sponsorships, holes-in-one, etc."

The result: 13 new events that raised \$750,000 for the community and exposed hundreds of golfers to the course and club.

"It definitely helped our recruiting," Brownfield says. "We got tons of leads out of the process."

But, he adds, successfully building an event business isn't easy.

"Every department has to come together," he says. "We do that as a team very well. When we have events here, everyone's working together because it's an opportunity to show the club off. But, when it's over, the members don't care what you've done the past three days. You can't lose sight of the fact that it's their club."

Between new revenue from member recruitment and the outside events, the club could now afford the new irrigation system. But, they didn't take approval for granted.

"It was a two-year process," Morris says. "There was no way that any one of us individually could have gotten it approved. Scott fielded numerous questions from golfers. Mark did the same. They got the same information about it from all of us. We were all on the same page."

Thanks to the new revenue and the "got

your back" team approach to communicating with the membership, the new irrigation system was approved recently and will be installed in 2008.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

The atmosphere of teamwork at Peoria is obviously a product of effort, but good relationships matter, too.

"We're friends, and we genuinely like each other, but we've also worked on building our relationships," Morris says. "You have to actively develop the type of relationships we have here. If you wait around for this to happen, it won't. There's too much involved. You have to consciously know that you're going to do this."

Bado echoes that.

"Everything we do is common sense," he says. "There's nothing we do here that's brain surgery. We help each other out and pull each other through. We actually attend each oth-

ers' education sessions. You can't be afraid to change, and you can't be afraid to grow."

So how much of their success can translate to other operations where this type of relationship doesn't yet exist?

"The first thing I would recommend to a club if they were in the situation we were in five years ago is to develop a team relationship," Morris says. "Those three managers have to be on board. Otherwise, it's a fist fight."

Bado also stresses the need for a club's leadership to buy into the team concept.

"You have to educate your board and get advocates," he says. "Everyone has to know the rules. The g.m. concept is great, but you have to have the right people in the right spots."

Brownfield agrees.

"Stretch yourself and reach out to members, employees and the community," he says. "You have to be an active part of the community. You can't sit at your desk."

### Getting everyone on the team

**B**uilding a good team structure among managers is key, but if employees aren't part of the plan, then failure is still possible. So, golf course superintendent Andy Morris, general manager Mark Bado, CCM, and golf professional Scott Brownfield of the Country Club of Peoria in Illinois reach out to staff as well.

"We actually take it a step farther by communicating as much as possible with the line level employees – the guys who are edging bunkers – to help them understand the goals of the club and the department," Morris says. "It's empowering for them. We have open communications sessions through the year."

And it's not just maintenance staff, Bado says.

"We do the same kind of orientation sessions with employees as we do with members," he says. "Dishwashers understand about the pro shop and the maintenance facility."

#### TEAM CHANGES

So what happens if one of the three moves on? Well, the team has a plan that describes the long-range vision for the club.

"The club itself is dynamic, but so is the golf course," Morris says. "We never want to fall behind. But, if one leaves, the other two will stay behind and keep on track. That said, beyond the people, we have policies and procedures in place that go beyond personality. You can replace a person and recover."

Bado agrees the system in place helps cope with a personnel change.

"The system is right," he says. "We have all the pieces in place. Hopefully, if we changed people, we'd still be going in the right direction."

Brownfield concurs.

"We're making long-term decisions that go beyond our tenure," he says. "We might not be here, but the things we're putting in place will still be happening. We have something special going on right now. There's only two ways to go ... forward or back. We want to go forward." GCI