

CLUB MANAGER PROFILE

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# It's the club, first!

Barbara Jodoin is redefining the general manager role by maintaining a fierce focus on bottom-up management and top-flight communication

BY PAT JONES





**Y**ou can sum up Barbara Jodoin's philosophy in four simple words: It's the club, first! For Jodoin, it's about providing impeccable service to members. But, it's also about creating a club culture that members participate in, appreciate and sometimes even sacrifice to be a part of.

Pinetree Country Club in Kennesaw, Ga., isn't a name that's top of mind when thinking about elite clubs. Yet, thanks to a forward-thinking board and a dynamic manager, it's one to watch.

Jodoin has 30 years of experience in the hospitality business, the first half with hotels and resorts and the second with private clubs. She started in the hotel business because she loved the chaos of serving different customers with different needs, but the commoditization of hotels eventually drove her away.

"I wasn't happy just looking at the bottom line, and it bothered me that great service didn't seem to matter as much," she says.

So in 1992, when her husband was transferred to Florida for his job, she jumped over to the club market. Her learning ground was a good one – Martin Downs Country Club in Palm City, Fla. – before moving over to Piper's Landing Country Club, one of the more exclusive clubs in the state. Another transfer for her family landed her at Pinetree in 2004. The club, led by board president Stan Hodges, recently completed its first five-year improvement plan that included significant renovations to the course, range and the Olympic-size swimming pool. The next phase is just getting underway.

As if managing the club wasn't enough, Jodoin is serving her first elected term on the USGA Green Section Committee and is managing partner of Merrows Management, a consulting and property management company that helps clubs fix operating problems.

#### **What was Pinetree's state when you started?**

The club had the critical components of success but hadn't invested – the physical plant needed attention. But we had 600 members who wanted a great club and were willing to support the member-owned business. We wrote a five-year plan, and the president said if we could achieve half of it, he'd be happy. We did it all. We have the largest private pool in the state. It's been redone, and it's now an integral part of the club's social life. We also rebuilt the driving range and practice area. In 2008, a tee-to-green renovation of the golf course completed our first round of upgrades.

#### **How has the culture changed?**

Our organizational structure looks like it's upside-down to some. The board is at the bottom of the chart. They're the club's foundation, and they establish philosophies and policies. I'm next. They support me, and I support the managers, and they support the staff. That strategy highlights the fact that if you have a great staff you have a great club. Hiring the right people at the line level is critical. The top tiers of our organization are the members, and most important, the club is the highest priority. No one member is more important than the success of the club as an institution.

We also talk a lot about members' obligations. They'll be asked to sacrifice for success. One ex-

ample was the vote to renovate the course. That vote meant they'd have to give up their course for seven months. In the end, 96 percent voted yes. That speaks volumes about the culture here. You hear horror stories about losing members during a renovation, but we didn't lose one member.

#### **The members bought into the plan?**

Absolutely. Duty to the organization is a focal point. What does it mean to be a member/owner? Sure, membership has privileges, but privileges come with responsibility. Yes, you get to play when you want with whomever you want, create your own programs, govern yourselves, etc., but the flip side is to remember constantly what's best for the organization and support its success.

#### **What's the smartest thing the club has done to be more competitive?**

I can't narrow it down to one thing because we've done so much. First, we upgraded the facilities, particularly the driving range, golf course and aquatic facilities. We also expanded our family-based programs and developed a junior social committee. We've implemented the U.S. Kid's Golf tees program. These tees allow children to play the course. This year, we'll add an assistant pro whose key role is to work with children and novices. We do everything we can to foster the game within the club.

Clubs keep talking about being the center

of family life, but we've actually implemented creative programs such as a concierge system that offers discounts on services outside the club for things such as hotels, rental cars, dry cleaning, etc. Our members receive those services for less. It's a great way for members to know we care about them off campus. We want them to have a positive experience with anything associated with the club, and these value-added services cost the club's budget nothing.

#### **So you encourage thinking outside the box?**

I detest the phrase "think outside the box!" It implies there is a box. Each club faces certain realities and resource issues, but you need to use your imagination and intelligence to create great aspects of the club. We're all a part of the ongoing process of reinventing the club. There's no box. That expression is forbidden within my team.

#### **What did you try that didn't work out?**

It's less about what didn't work than a lesson I've learned. I call it the 99-and-1 rule. You can spend far too much time trying to satisfy that 1 percent of members who are always critical. I've learned, finally, to ignore the 1 percent and focus all my attention on the 99 percent who really value the club. That's why so many club managers burn out. They spend all their time on that 1 percent.

#### **What's the biggest mistake most clubs are making right now?**

When you have an economic downturn, clubs devalue themselves by dropping joining fees. Clubs who were asking \$30,000 now are lowering or waiving initiation fees drastically. How does that make existing members feel? How do you bring the value back to the original level once you've discounted it? It jeopardizes the long-term success for some short-term security. New members feel like it's cheap to get in and out. Managers and boards throughout the country are making that same mistake every day.

#### **What's the alternative in tough times?**

Add value instead. Keep the value in the membership. There's a simple equation – services equal the dollars available. We have little attrition – less than 5 percent. But, if we had been impacted more by the downturn, we'd go to the members and let them suggest what they want curtailed or kept for services. If you can satisfy your membership and not have a dollar left over, you're managing perfectly in a private club setting.



### What do you learn from others?

I always know what others are doing, but I don't use that as a benchmark. They have different realities than I do. We have our own business model with our own forward motion. We stay

committed to our business plan. If other clubs offer services or experiences that we're not offering, I'll look. I'll always steal a great idea. But, if they're simply cutting costs, devaluing their club, I'm not getting in that line.

### Explain more about the manager/board relationship.

Many managers are afraid of risk, and something different can be risky. Too many managers tend to spend more time detailing problems to boards rather than focusing on presenting creative solutions. Most boards see assessments or fee increases as the only remedy. These shouldn't be the only tools in your bag. Board members are the consumers of our club services; they aren't the industry professionals. It goes back to the operations philosophy described earlier. Owners hire us to manage for their benefit. We have completed almost \$5 million of improvements without assessment or dues increases, and Pinetree has a small debt to equity ratio.

My board is a great support structure, but you can't just dump problems on them and expect them to create solutions. I'd fail as a manager if I did that. They're not running the business; I am. It's my responsibility to provide sound business leadership.

I grew up in Boston, and I'm a Red Sox fan, so I'll use a baseball analogy. The members of the club are like the owners of the team. They hire a manager who manages all aspects of the team. The owner enjoys the game from the box, gives the manager money to work with and expects results. The manager's job is to create a winning team for the owner. But, when the Sox finally won the World Series, the trophy was presented to the owner. That's the way it should be. The club members are the winners; we're just the players on the field.

Many times when I talk with other general managers, their presidents are telling them how to play the game. That's not their role. Also, in sports, no owner expects their team to win every game. Members should understand that. Win or lose, we're here for you, and we should expect your support.

### What's your definition of teamwork?

Everyone says, "Empower your team," but it scares managers to death because if they fail, will I lose my job? That's the fear in the true team concept. If the team has a losing season, the manager usually takes the fall. This also is why general managers would rather have the board make the tough decisions. I give my team the tools they need to succeed. What I expect back is success.

In our organization, the closer you are to the top of the organizational chart, the more impor-



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tant you are to our overall success. Everybody must buy in. Everyone on the staff and within the membership understands the culture and mindset. We're all on the same page. Contrary to the old saw, there is an "I" in team – as in, "I am

accountable" and "I am responsible to the team." Too few people like to be held responsible for the overall success of the company. Here, we all are. That's the difference. I strongly believe that, and so far, I haven't been fired, so I'm doing OK.

#### Who was your mentor, and what did he or she teach you?

The person who comes to mind is my former boss Roy Dunfey, the owner of the old Parker House in Boston and a few other hotels. He epitomized the philosophy of service and taught all of his employees that providing an exceptional experience ensures a positive bottom line.

Roy also taught me you can never manage from your office. Walk the property, talk to people and inspect every inch of the property every day. I do most of my paperwork at home on Monday when the club is closed. I spend the rest of the week highly visible and available to members and staff. Also, know your staff. If you don't know them, how can you inspire them to succeed? Roy always remembered my name and my children's names and knew what was important to me. That blew me away because he could do that with 400 or 500 employees. He practiced what he preached.

I also have a hero. My mom had muscular dystrophy and raised six children from a wheelchair. She never felt sorry for herself. When we had a little problem, she'd remind us that there were worse things in life.

#### Defend the future of the private club.

There will always be a market for quality. I like to think of private clubs like Ivy League universities. I think about the University of Notre Dame – it's different than it was in the 1940s – it has computer labs, and it has changed the way it operates, but it still gives students something different, something special. It's a great institution, and great institutions evolve and remain.

In the future, you'll no longer have the option to be a moderately successful private club. They won't exist. You must be excellent. You'll have to foster the idea that it's a privilege to belong. Not everyone gets into an Ivy League school. Not everyone will be part of a private club. We are now only 25 percent of the industry.

Our aim is for Pinetree to be in that elite group that will offer a high-quality experience, evolve to meet the needs of our members and always remain a private club. There will be fewer private clubs, but they'll all provide a unique experience, and getting in will say something about your success and expectations as a member. True private clubs will be a rare commodity that will be highly sought after. That line is being drawn right now. **GCI**

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