

10 PEOPLE who are SHAPING the FUTURE of private clubs

Today's private club industry is transforming to meet the needs of a changing membership. We identify 10 people on the cutting edge of the latest trends.

BY REBECCA LARSEN

Private clubs have a reputation for being stodgy — reluctant to change and stuck in tradition. That has caused many clubs to struggle in recent years, as they have been slow to adapt to changing demographics, technology and social mores.

But that's not the case for all clubs. A few see the future as very bright, so long as they adapt.

"We are about to enter a time that will be remarkable for private clubs," said Jeffrey McFadden, general manager of The Union League of Philadelphia. "Millennials value authentic experiences more so than possessions, and that's what clubs deliver. But to get what we never had, we have to do what we have never done."

McFadden is one of the leaders who is trying new things, creating unique experiences for his members and watching as his club grows at an exponential rate.

Golf Inc. identified 10 of the most innovative individuals who work at or with private clubs. These visionaries are taking steps to bring about the resurgence in private clubs. They are bringing new energy and growth and making changes that extend far beyond the norm.

JEFFREY MCFADDEN

- Chief Operating Officer and General Manager
 - The Union League of Philadelphia
 - Philadelphia
-

McFadden, who was only 30 when he was hired 19 years ago, said The Union League has been transformed from what some might call an "old boys network." The result is dramatic changes in the private club's membership and facilities that have placed McFadden among the most respected leaders in the private club industry.

His club has increased from 1,500 to 4,000 members, which has pulled it out of a financial tailspin to make it one of the most successful clubs in the nation. He has increased dues to pay for amenities that give up-to-date value to members.

This includes the acquisition of a Donald Ross golf course last year. The course, 12 miles from the club's Center City clubhouse, was previously known as the Torresdale-Frankford Country Club and had gone through difficult times. Renamed the Union League Golf Club, it went from 140 to 450 full-time golf members.



"We have a waiting list there to join as well," McFadden said, adding that the club is considering adding a second golf course.

Another major amenity for members was better parking; the club bought a 400-car garage near its main clubhouse. And dining options have expanded with the purchase of two suburban restaurants for members: the Guard House in Gladwyne and The Bungalow at Stone Harbor.

The club has also increased membership, he said, by offering members \$3,600 if they get someone new to join.

He also requires members to propose a new member before they can serve on a committee,

something he said has changed the culture of the club.

KEVIN VITALE

■ General Manager and Chief Operating Officer

■ Baltusrol Golf Club

■ Springfield, N.J.



Although Baltusrol had a long and sterling reputation, it was in need of changes when Vitale arrived 15 years ago. Under his leadership, the club came back to life and made a lasting impression, which the world saw when Baltusrol hosted the PGA Championship in 2016.

“When I came to Baltusrol 15 years ago, I said, ‘Let’s find out who we are and who we want to be and what we want to do,’” Vitale said. “As in any business, we wanted to have a long-range plan, a mission statement, capital plans and financial models before trying to make improvements. Strategically, we wanted to be at a higher level.”

The club had deferred maintenance on its historical property to avoid raising dues. But that meant buildings were crumbling, the food and beverage operation was in poor shape and the golf courses needed work.

Vitale convinced members and directors that the landmark property needed upgrades, and he led a crusade that resulted in \$55 million in improvements. The changes were paid for with profits — without going into debt and without special assessments on members.

The 80,000-square-foot clubhouse and the two golf courses underwent renovations. A new restaurant and new locker rooms were added. Twenty-five guest rooms were renovated, as was housing for 55 employees who live on the property. There is a new two-level golf performance center and renovated landscaping. An additional \$5 million in improvements is underway.

“You need membership with a vision and staff with a vision” to accomplish all that, Vitale said.

MARK BURNETT

■ Chief Operating Officer-President

■ ClubCorp

■ Dallas

When it came time last year for the largest club ownership and management company to select a new chief operating officer and president, they didn’t have to look far. Mark Burnett, who had led ClubCorp’s efforts in reinventing many of its 133 country clubs and alumni, business and sports clubs during the previous decade, was waiting in the wings.

In announcing the change, CEO Eric Affeldt said the company was fortunate to have Burnett available to lead future efforts to improve the company’s many properties. After all, Burnett had already been a key player in the largest acquisition ever made by the company: Sequoia Golf, which added 25 golf and country clubs to its portfolio.

Burnett has spearheaded far-reaching improvements at dozens of ClubCorp facilities, focused in many cases on the food and beverage area, adding patio space for outdoor dining and giving inside dining rooms a more comfortable and casual look.



“There is a lot more media, a lot more light entertainment and much greater use of sports bar themes,” he said. “Aquatics is a big focus: splash pads and slides for the kids and new outdoor bars for their parents who are at the pool to watch over them.”

The company has introduced cabanas around pool areas and charges users a fee.

On golf courses, new family tees have been introduced for kids and seniors. The fitness areas have been enlarged and now include more group exercise programs and classes. Expanded business space in clubs includes small meeting rooms plus areas where people can use their laptops and power up their electronic devices.

There have been no assessments on members for the improvements, but members have been closely involved in the changes.

STEVE GRAVES

■ President and Founder

■ Creative Golf Marketing

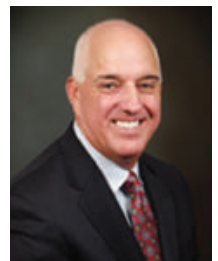
■ Manhattan, Kan.

Creative Golf Marketing, a consulting firm for private clubs of all kinds, including sports, yacht and ski clubs, is known for focusing on the basics and improving club revenues, marketability, efficiency and long-term stability.

Graves is a popular inspirational speaker in the private club industry with a special knack for identifying upcoming trends and helping others turn clubs around. He has worked with 1,300 of the 3,400 member-owned private clubs in the United States.

“Private clubs used to be for the blue blood, but now they’re for the new blood,” Graves said. “Newer members used to have a father who was a doctor, lawyer or company president. Now their moms and dads are plumbers or teachers. They’re dual-income families with income of \$100,000 to \$200,000. For many of them, this is the first time they’ve ever joined a club.”

Generations X and Y are pouring into private clubs that have the right focus, Graves said. Today’s members are older when they join, per-



haps because they have waited until their 30s or 40s to marry and have children.

“Now they’ve matured, and they’re tired of the bar scene. Private clubs are a wonderful option for them and their families,” he said.

Clubs that resist change and cling to traditional settings and activities are not prospering, Graves said. That’s partly because 30- and 40-somethings want to socialize in a setting where they can dress casually and eat informally, he said. They want to bring the kids. They expect TVs to be on in many areas of a club so they can watch – but not listen to – sports, business news and reports on the stock market. They want clubs tuned into technology.

“Private clubs need to supply the best in high-speed internet if they hope to become a business meeting place,” Graves said.

KURT KUEBLER

- Partner
 - Kopplin, Kuebler & Wallace
 - Jupiter, Fla.
-



Kuebler, a partner in a nationwide executive search firm that serves private clubs, was previously general manager at Isleworth Golf & Country Club and The Loxahatchee Club, both in Florida, as well as leading other private golf clubs. He also was national director of the Club Managers Association

of America.

But now he’s using that experience in a new role, as one of the leaders of a first-class team that visits an estimated 300 clubs a year to find extraordinary candidates to fill top jobs at private clubs. He is helping identify and train a new generation of leaders in the club industry.

He handles searches for both member-owned and private developer clubs as well as country, golf and yacht clubs and homeowner associations. He also holds training seminars for club staff and management.

Kuebler believes outstanding leadership is a key factor in the growing success of private clubs, and he works constantly to pinpoint candidates who have the right skills to make sure those clubs remain prosperous.

“We see firsthand who’s making an impact in

the industry,” Kuebler said. “Every search we do for a club that wants to fill a job involves extensive survey work.”

Private clubs want managers who are visible and engaged with the staff. “Members want to know the executives who lead the club,” he said.

“Club executives must have exceptional leadership skills,” Kuebler said. “There’s an art to getting things done. They have to be able to work efficiently with club board members.”

ROB DEMORE

- Senior Vice President
 - Troon Privé Operations
 - Scottsdale, Ariz.
-

Troon Privé, the private club division of Troon Golf, manages 70 private clubs, including many that have reinvented themselves recently with clubhouse improvements and course renovations, DeMore said.

His tenure with Troon Privé has included leading each of his assigned resorts and private clubs through multiple transformations, including strategic land acquisitions, member equity conversions and startup operations. His expertise in club and resort operations has led to national recognition throughout his career.

After a renovation, a key part of the promotion process is seeking new members. DeMore helps clubs tell their stories by creating short videos that feature members talking about their clubs. The videos are released to the clubs first and later may appear on YouTube. One club in Manchester, N.H., founded in 1923, is now completely sold out and has 500 member families.

“We encourage every club to tell its story on film,” DeMore said.

Privé has developed a program that allows members of any Troon private club to play at other Troon clubs around the country.

At some private clubs, offerings have been greatly expanded to appeal to a younger audi-



ence with families. This is particularly true at Silver Creek Valley Country Club in San Jose, Calif., DeMore said.

Youngsters at Silver Creek are introduced to golf using simulators. Kids can participate in swim teams at the pool as well as use the tennis courts and fitness center. There’s even a “homework club” that picks up kids after school and takes them to the club to study or take part in athletic activities.

DONNA OTIS

- General Manager and Chief Operating Officer
 - Lake Merced Golf Club
 - Daly City, Calif.
-

Donna Otis joined the Lake Merced Golf Club 20 years ago and has worked her way up through several positions, including food and beverage director and director of golf, to her current leadership post.

Lake Merced is a historical club founded in 1922. Membership has grown very diverse during the years, and there is new interest in golf among younger families and women.

Otis has been on the cutting edge in creating that new interest, and the trends she has been leading are expected to be the future of the industry.

“Younger families want to introduce their children to golf,” she said. “But we also have other activities that they didn’t have years ago, like pony rides on the Fourth of July and a haunted house for Halloween.”

But the club’s 500 members are mainly there for the golf. The club maintains a championship golf course that regularly hosts junior championships and LPGA events.

The club has far-forward tees on every hole to attract less skilled players. The change makes the 6,400-yard course play at 5,000 yards.

The club has also had success with offering a variety of membership types. A less expensive young associate membership has helped bring in 25- to 40-year-old golf-



ers, many of whom are employed by high-tech companies in nearby San Francisco and Silicon Valley. About 30 to 40 new members have been added every year for the past five years.

MICHAEL RODRIGUEZ

- General Manager
 - Audubon Country Club
 - Naples, Fla.
-

The year 2016 saw significant growth in membership at Audubon. Under the leadership of Michael Rodriguez, the 25-year-old club managed by Troon Golf has enjoyed a rejuvenation. His leadership during a major renovation and a renewed emphasis on customer service has added 20 new members in the past year alone.



The clubhouse was taken down to the studs and rebuilt, and both the front nine and the back nine of the golf course underwent improvements.

Outdoor dining was added, and the new facility has regularly been sold out.

The club raised initiation fees and dues to a level that puts them among the highest in the area, yet members and potential members didn't blink.

"We're at the highest membership numbers ever due to the positive energy of the improvements," Rodriguez said.

Membership also grew because of increased home sales in the area. Those who buy a home in the private residential development surrounding the club must join the club.

Because of intense competition from other nearby clubs, Rodriguez has made personalized service a critical objective.

"There are many gated communities in the area, and we always aim to put our best foot forward," Rodriguez said. "In interactions with members, our staff understands that we want to exceed what members ask for. If there is anything they want inside the gates that we can help them with, we try really hard to provide it."

ROBERT JONES

- Chief Operating Officer and General Manager
 - Desert Mountain
 - Scottsdale, Ariz.
-

Desert Mountain is an 8,000-acre gated luxury-home development, site of six Jack Nicklaus Signature golf courses. Although it continues



to focus on golf (with 1,900 golf equity members), the changing economy and lifestyles of its members have led the community to add new activities and amenities throughout the property.

Jones, who has been with Desert Mountain from its beginning 20 years ago, has provided the critical leadership needed for this change of direction. His efforts have set an example for other clubs seeking to diversify their offerings in order to remain relevant in today's rapidly changing economic and social climate.

"One of the goals of our members is to create activities for their children and grandchildren," Jones said. "The objective is to get the grandkids to come for Christmas instead of the grandparents going to visit them."

Under his management, the club has arranged with nearby Bartlett Lake Marina to rent boats and equipment for waterskiing and fishing. Horseback riding and bicycling are available on trails throughout the property, and there are also trails for motorbikes. Members can even have overnight campouts and cookouts in safari-style tents. A new 46,000-square-foot fitness and wellness center, as well as a spa, are available to residents. Desert Mountain has hired a youth activities director and now offers golf and tennis lessons to youngsters. Many members join in the thriving croquet competition and take croquet lessons.

Desert Mountain, which has always been known for its challenging golf courses, has added far-forward tees on all six courses to attract less-accomplished golfers. And a new

par-3 course, also designed by Nicklaus, is in the works.

RICK SNELLINGER

- President-Chief Executive Officer
 - H. Chambers Co.
 - Baltimore, Md.
-

Founded in 1899 as a painting company, Chambers has evolved into a firm acclaimed for its architectural and design work for clubs. It has nearly 60 club projects underway in the United States, as well as one in Canada and another in Hong Kong. Snellinger's outstanding track record has been demonstrated repeatedly through his work in helping private clubs stay on the cutting edge when it comes to facilities.



The firm's mission, however, is to do more than provide designs for clubhouses or draw up plans for additions, said Snellinger, who has risen to the top of the company and is now principal shareholder.

"One of my guiding philosophies in architecture and design is to avoid looking at individual projects by themselves and do more overall planning," he said. "I want to look at all pieces of the puzzle."

If a club wants to replace its swimming pool, Snellinger said, "It's not just about the pool. It's also about: Is the pool in the right location and should we move it and unlock the site for some other goal? We take a holistic perspective and implement it in a phased approach."

The company makes satisfying members and guests central to its plans.

"Clubs that have success focus on member and guest enjoyment," Snellinger said. "It's not about 'return on investment'; it's 'return on enjoyment.' That's the key to success in recruiting members."

Clubs should look beyond the basics, he said, and think of themselves as being part of the resort industry. For example, many clubs are adding water parks similar to those that attract young families to high-end hotels.