



Outside Expert

By Joe Barks, Editor



Behind the remarkable turnaround of San Luis Obispo (Calif.) Country Club (“Restoring the California Dream,” *C&RB*, January 2014), there’s the equally intriguing backstory of how a key to its recovery was the leadership of Mike Stanton, who stepped in during the club’s most desperate times to be its new General Manager/COO, despite having no previous club-management experience.

For this profile of Stanton as the 2013 winner of The Mead Grady Award for country/golf clubs with fewer than 600 full-privilege members, as part of the Excellence in Club Management Awards co-sponsored by the McMahon Group and *Club & Resort Business*, we went back to him for insights on how his background as a local businessman and restaurant operator helped him take on the daunting tasks at hand at SLOCC—and on where he needed to get up to speed quickly:

Q What perceptions about club management did you have as an “outsider” that proved either helpful, or misguided, once you came into it?

A My perceptions regarding club management were somewhat on the naïve side. I did not realize the depth or breadth of knowledge one needs to properly manage a private club. A country club is really five or more business

Achievements

AT SAN LUIS OBISPO CC UNDER MIKE STANTON'S LEADERSHIP

- Directed 16-month corporate restructuring process to change club governance so non-dues-paying members would no longer hold voting shares (nearly one-third of shares had been held by that group).
- Food-and-beverage program turned around from losing over \$100,000 annually to three straight years of at least 15% sales increases and four straight years of operating profits. Overall F&B revenues now exceed \$2.1 million.
- New \$1.05 million, 5,000-sq. ft. fitness center built in six months.
- Worker’s compensation modifier reduced annually and is currently half (.60) of what it once was.
- New capital projects achieved without assessments or dues increases; existing debt restructured to lower monthly debt service.
- Club that was on the brink of insolvency in 2009 now has full memberships in all categories, and capital reserves have been restored.



Mike Stanton (above), a local restaurant operator, was brought in to be General Manager/COO during dire times for San Luis Obispo CC. For directing a complete turnaround in his first club-management role, he has earned Excellence in Club Management honors.

An after-dark “slip ‘n slide” ride on the golf course has turned quarterly sleeper programs into a big hit with SLOCC kids and parents alike.

operations “under” one roof. Initially I underestimated how interlaced they are with each other.

The one perception I had that proved to be correct was the need for excellent business skills, especially the financial aspects.

Q What reservations did you have about moving into club management—and what opportunities did you see for your personal development?

A I had several reservations—it’s always a little scary to start any new job. And while I knew some of the issues the club was facing, I was pretty sure I didn’t know them all. While club management is a part of the hospitality business, I knew it had a lot more “moving parts” than a stand-alone restaurant.

As for opportunities, I saw that I could learn about an industry I had only been exposed to as a consumer. And I have always enjoyed, and found it fulfilling, to take on complex projects, organize them into manageable pieces and solve problems.

Q What advantages did you find you had by not having a traditional club management background—and what specific aspects of club management did you realize you needed to learn in a hurry?

A I wasn’t caught up in the “we’ve always done it that way” mentality, and was able to look at things with “fresh eyes.” But in an industry built on traditions, you must be very careful about choosing which ones need to be changed, and which ones should be left alone.

I realized quickly that the most important thing about a private club was our members’ experience. I needed to learn everything I could about providing the proper experience for the SLOCC members. I read everything I could get my hands on about club management and attended as many educational events as I could, at the local, state chapter and national levels. These were invaluable for me and they were where I realized that the individuals involved in club management were some of the brightest and most passionate people I had ever encountered in the hospitality industry. Their willingness to share information greatly impressed me. I received a lot of help from numerous managers, and it’s now important for me to “pay this forward” whenever I can.

Q How did you help those already on the SLOCC staff who had been working in club management develop a different way of looking at things to bring about needed change? And for those you brought



Ideas

IMPLEMENTED SUCCESSFULLY AT SAN LUIS OBISPO CC UNDER MIKE STANTON'S DIRECTION

■ Golf tournament participation grown to record levels with help of improved packaging that includes features such as a daily morning Bloody Mary bar

with accoutrements that include poached shrimp, bacon stir sticks and varieties of hot sauce.

■ Quarterly sleeper program for kids includes dining room “campground,” “slip ‘n slide” feature on 18th fairway, night swim, ice cream sundae bar and breakfast cookout.

■ New-member orientation/welcome now includes gift basket with local wine and food products, golf attire, massage and dinner gift certificates, golf lesson and three guest golf passes. New members also have comped lunch or dinner

with assigned “mentor couple.”

in from the outside who hadn’t yet worked in clubs, what did you stress they’d have to learn?

A My first goal was to get all staff members “on the same page.” Our departments were fragmented and wasting time on “turf wars.” We had to get everyone aligned to our mission of taking care of the members.

This was easier said than done. People are naturally resistant to changes, especially big ones. Most of our staff embraced this and are still with us, delighting our members every day. We released some staff members who couldn’t embrace our values.

The new staff members we brought in were a mix of those with prior club experience and those without. Being the only private club in our area, we don’t have a pool of potential staff members with club experience. We made it very clear what our standards and expectations would be, and trained everyone in those standards. We stressed to everyone that we were here for one reason, to take care of our members, and that if they have what I call the “service heart,” to derive personal satisfaction from serving others, they would do well.

Q You’ve now become a passionate advocate yourself for the profession of club management. How would you “sell” those starting out in hospitality on the value of considering club management as a career, vs. other hospitality segments?

A You’re correct—I’m passionate about our industry and I’m very proud to call myself a club manager. If a person has decided that a career in hospitality is the right choice for them, I tell them about the working environment, beautiful settings and in many cases grand buildings they can find in the club business. I also tell them that the teamwork in a well-managed club will be unlike what they’re likely to experience in other venues, and that the bond that occurs between staff and members is very special. Clubs also typically have better benefits than other areas of hospitality, and with so many positions in a club, the ability to advance is good.

C&RB