

MCMAHON GROUP / CLUB & RESORT BUSINESS

2011 Excellence in Club Management Award Winner



Reasons to Rejoice

By Joe Barks, Editor

Abraham Lincoln may not have been the first to use a thorn-vs.-rose comparison to describe the power and value of a positive outlook. But Abe once again showed his knack for finding the right words when he said, “We can complain because rose bushes have thorns, or rejoice because thorn bushes have roses.”

Developers in Greer, S.C., may or may not have had Lincoln’s words in mind when they sat down with PGA Tour pro Jay Haas in 1989 to found a new community and club. But, the story goes, someone in the group said it would be nice to have a logo for what they were creating that included a rose. That led to brainstorming about a name, and eventually “Thornblade” emerged as the preferred choice, as a word that could not only be symbolized by a rose, but also represent golf by evoking a blade of grass.

The theme was carried out both in the community, with neighborhood streets named after rose varieties, and in the Thornblade Club, with its logo of a full red rose and the Rose Ballroom as the clubhouse’s showcase venue. But it really wasn’t fully implemented until more than 10 years later, when a new General Manager, Patricia Calder, arrived in 2001 to help lead the club in positive new directions.

The success achieved at Thornblade under Calder’s leadership has all stemmed from an upbeat attitude and clear message—good things will bloom from the right approach—that she has infused into the club throughout her tenure, even in the face of significant strategic, operational and personal challenges. And for how she has helped Thornblade reap the rewards of such a consistently rosy outlook, Calder is the 2011 co-winner of The Mead Grady Award, in the category of Country/Golf Clubs with Fewer Than 600 Full-Privilege Members, for the



Excellence in Club Management Awards, co-sponsored by the McMahon Group and *Club & Resort Business*.

Best of All Worlds

Thornblade Club was purchased from its developer by the membership shortly after it was completed. But when Calder came from North Carolina’s Coral Bay Club (after previously being GM of the Country Club of Charleston, S.C. and a manager at the Commonwealth Club in Richmond, Va.), Thornblade was still searching for an identity, according to the club’s President, Jody Gallagher.

It had an acclaimed, Tom Fazio-designed golf course and a prominent golf professional, Haas, with a vested interest in the club’s success. But it had also built a new, 55,000-sq. ft. clubhouse to replace its original building, which burned down in 1999. So questions lingered over whether the club should focus on being “pure golf,” or instead start to pursue the emerging “family-centric” trend in earnest.

Calder’s response, as the new GM, typified the “get-it-done” stance that Gallagher says has marked her entire time at Thornblade: We don’t have to choose; we can find ways to excel in everything we want, and need, to do.

She then quickly set about proving that point, through a steady stream of accomplishments and successfully implemented ideas (see boxes, pgs. 51 and 52) that have kept Thorn-



Under Patricia Calder’s leadership, a perennially rosy outlook and rock-solid operating practices have kept Thornblade Club on a positive path in the face of every challenge that’s come its way.

PHOTOS COURTESY THORNBLADE CLUB

Achievements

AT THORNBLADE CLUB UNDER PATRICIA CALDER'S LEADERSHIP

- Popular Thornblade Classic pro-am charity tournament, hosted for 10 years by Jay Haas, during which it drew guests including Arnold Palmer, Fred Couples and Fuzzy Zoeller, is now part of BMW Charity Pro-Am on Nationwide Tour, which has been held at the club for five years. As part of the tournament coming to the club, a large party deck was built for Thornblade at no charge.
- New position of Membership Marketing Director was created and over 100 new members were gained in 2010, through a market-driven initiation fee pricing structure.
- Casual dining has increased 20% during the past six years and since 2001, private party sales have tripled and banquet business has increased by nearly 120%. Overall, food-and-beverage business has become profitable at the same time member satis-



With a 55,000-sq. ft. clubhouse that was built in 1999 after the club's original building burned down, and a newly renovated golf course, Thornblade will now look at adding a fitness facility.

faction has been greatly improved. Sunday brunches and Prime Rib Night are now often sold out.

- Golf course renovation of tees and greens completed in 2010 on time and within budget (\$2 million).

blade Club flowering and at the forefront of industry innovation. Even when the recession posed some of the greatest challenges to ever confront the club industry, Gallagher notes, Calder wasn't deterred, and her can-do attitude didn't falter.

"The true test of a leader is how they perform their duties in difficult times," he says. "There has been no better test of this than the last several years for not only Thornblade Club, but the entire industry. During this period Patricia proactively led the club down a path of prosperity, not pain. We have experienced a growth in our membership through aggressive marketing, and improved operating income and efficiencies."

Permanently Sunny Skies

The same glass-is-half-full, where-there's-a-will determination continues to color Calder's decision-making process as new challenges present themselves.

With the club having recently completed a \$2 million renovation of its tees and greens, Thornblade's next big strategic need is for a new fitness facility. But while accumulating the needed capital funds will take time after the major course expenditure, Calder is still finding inventive ways to take steps in that direction.

When Paul Pillsbury, who had been working as a recreation director in New Hampshire, came by the club while visiting family in South Carolina last Christmas, Calder saw him as a perfect fit for an open staff position in her membership department. While Pillsbury did not have a sales and marketing background, he had the outgoing personality—and recreational experience—that would sync well with Thornblade's future direction, even before a new fitness center could be financed and planned.

In his new role as Sales and Member Relations Manager, Pillsbury is already coordinating junior camps and working with Thornblade's directors of golf and tennis on new fitness-related programming. The club's Board of Governors has also added a new Wellness Committee.

"When we get to the point where we have funding [for the fitness facility], we'll be well on our way to being ready to put it into action," Calder notes. "We have over 800 kids in our club,

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and Paul is also helping to implement activities that people of all ages can participate in, like a quarter-mile walking/running trail in the neighborhood that's marked by roses on the sidewalks."

This same inclination to look past obstacles—if she indeed even sees them—also permeates Calder's opinions about subjects like the current state of opportunities for women in the club industry. Gender is now a non-issue in club management, she states flatly.

"I actually got into the business by mistake," Calder says. "After starting out in pre-vet programs and journalism, I taught high school before starting to work at the Commonwealth Club. Once I was there, I quickly found the club business to be addictive.

"It's true that when I started, there weren't that many women in top club

management positions," she adds. "But that was 25 years ago, and things have changed dramatically. For our senior staff here, we're now about 50-50 with male and female department heads, and from what I see around the country, I don't think we're unique in that aspect. It also seems like there are now as many women, if not more, coming out of the college [hospitality] programs.

"If there's anything, in fact, that I have to tell young women who are coming into the club business now, it's that their goals shouldn't stop at positions for event planning or marketing, where women have traditionally started," Calder adds. "There's so much available beyond that now—clubs are far more open to having women managers in all positions, and good ones can make it anywhere. But they have to know what it means to be



Thornblade Club's membership and staff showed all-out support for Calder's personal challenge with cancer last year by turning the entire property pink during the Nationwide Tour's BMW Charity Pro-Am.

professional, and understand that there's no difference in what the expectations will be for them than for anyone else."

The most inspiring example of Calder's prevailing attitude—but not a surprising one to those who knew her—was how she responded to the personal challenge of breast cancer last year. Presented with a stark diagnosis on Valentine's Day, she didn't hesitate to proceed with treatment and by the end of the year, after four surgeries and aggressive radiation, had once again gained the upper hand.

"I think I'm cancer-free now, although there will still be drug therapy for the next four years," she says. "It was a challenging year, certainly—but I now tell everyone that going through it was the best thing that ever happened to me, because of the incredible love and support so many people gave to me."

As part of that outpouring, the club membership and staff surprised Calder when she showed up for Saturday's events during the 2011 BMW Charity Pro-Am tournament—all flags on the golf course were pink, along with much of the garb being worn by players, spectators and other supporters.

Perhaps the best reminder that there's a better way to view things comes through the words the club lives by on a daily basis, as displayed on its letterhead and website: "You don't belong to the Club... the Club belongs to you." With that kind of perspective, and Patricia Calder's distinctive approach to ever-positive management, it's not surprising to see how for Thornblade Club, everything keeps coming up roses.

C&RB

Ideas

IMPLEMENTED AT THORNBLADE CLUB UNDER PATRICIA CALDER'S DIRECTION

- Created "All-Star" concept to attract more tour pro members (there are now 16) and enhance the appeal of the club's Champagne Shootout, held on New Year's Eve, which gives members a chance to be paired with a pro.

- Successful new social events have included Adult Treasure Hunt (teams of four drive around town for clues) and Ragtop Roadtrips (Sunday afternoon excursions for members with convertibles).

- Complimentary member appreciation breakfast is held each spring—an outdoor event where management and service staff wear pajamas as they provide wait service.

- The Food and Beverage Management Staff Retreat, an offsite, all-day brainstorming meeting, has been held since 2010 and yielded many successful ideas.

- Members participate in "Brightening the Blade," a kickoff holiday decorating event that includes a golf car decorating contest.



"Around-the-world" parties, featuring food and drinks from different countries, are held once a month at no charge for Thornblade Club members and prospects, thanks to sponsorships by members' companies.

RUNOVER