

MCMAHON GROUP / CLUB & RESORT BUSINESS
**2012 Excellence in Club
 Management Award Winner**



Eric Dietz, CCM, PGA, has directed a remarkable five-year turnaround at Lakewood CC that has seen a turnover of one-third of the membership, a drop in average age from 63 to under 50, and an increase in the number of member-family children under 18 to over 1,000.

Everyday Thrills

By Joe Barks, Editor

While conducting a tour of the Lakewood Country Club property in Rockville, Md., the club's General Manager/CEO, Eric Dietz, CCM, PGA, greets an elderly club member who's on his way to the parking lot, and strikes up a conversation. At the start of their chat, the member makes a passing reference to his 65th wedding anniversary before moving on through several other topics. After their visit wraps up, Dietz gets a hearty chuckle out of the man by saying as he walks away, "But what I'm really trying to figure out is how you got married when you were 10 years old."

Dietz was later reminded of the comment, and reaction, during a discussion about what distinguishes managers and their staffs in today's club business—a topic Dietz is well-qualified to address, as the 2012 co-recipient 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*. Dietz shares the 2012 Grady Award, which is determined by judging from a selection committee of a peer group of club managers, with Paul Skelton, CCM, General Manager/COO of The Country Club at DC Ranch in Scottsdale, Ariz. Skelton was featured in the May 2013 issue of *C&RB* ("The Right Hand for the Ranch").

"To me, the challenge is to have everyone on staff remember that we're always on stage, every day," Dietz says. "The GM

and department heads are the producers/directors, and the others are cast members. We all have to deliver a fresh and enjoyable production, no matter how many times a member may have already come to see the 'show.'

"It's all about looking for and picking up on clues to find ways to make every visit to the club a memorable one," Dietz continues. "It may be as simple as a comment that makes someone laugh and that they'll retell, or it might be seeing that someone's probably having a bad day and asking if there's anything





The Rees Jones-designed course has seen a boost in rounds (from 22,000 to 28,000) as part of the club's revival, and Lakewood is now hopeful of attracting a future USGA event.

we can do to help improve it. Whatever it may turn out to be, it comes down to being genuinely interested in striving to always treat members like guests, and guests like members."

Rave Reviews

When Dietz came to Lakewood in 2009, making a move that brought him back to his native Washington, D.C. area after serving as GM/COO of Rochester (Minn.) G&CC and

Achievements

AT LAKEWOOD COUNTRY CLUB UNDER ERIC DIETZ'S DIRECTION

- Over 150 new member families attracted in the past four years.
- Food-and-beverage operating losses reduced by nearly 50% while member dining and banquet revenues grown by over a third, to now total \$3 million.
- Golf grown from 22,000 to 28,000 rounds through innovative programs including complimentary family golf lessons, night golf socials using lighted balls and glow sticks, and margarita mixers. Men's Golf Association formed that now has 150 members.



Lakewood's innovative Rees Jones Grille hasn't stopped hopping since the moment it opened in 2009, with many nights still drawing five-deep-at-the-bar crowds.

- After a pipe burst and flooded the pro shop, insurance mitigation was used to transform the space with a new merchandise mix and more efficient and effective use of retail and administrative space.
- For the first time in the 54-year history of the club, initiation fees are now being segregated into a reserve account, and the club is on track to achieve a balanced budget.

Ridgemark G&CC in Hollister, Calif., there wasn't a lot of demand for, or excitement about, the daily "show" in Rockville. But through a series of aggressive initiatives and innovations (see "Achievements" and "Ideas" boxes on this and opposite page), Dietz and his staff plunged in to bring about a remarkable transition in the makeup of the membership audience.

Fully a third of Lakewood's 700 member families turned over in the next four years, and with that change came a huge drop in average member age, from 63 in 2009 to below 50 today. Not surprisingly, that also caused the ranks of member-family children under 18 to swell, to a number that now exceeds 1,000.

This dramatic shift in membership makeup has prompted a rewriting of the script for Lakewood's current daily productions, and presented its own new set of management and facility challenges. But under the direction of Dietz—who already brings unique credentials to his job as one of just 11 PGA members in the world to have achieved CCM status, and who stands to be in even more rarified air when he completes his current pursuit of PGA Master Professional status—the Lakewood staff is already learning new "lines" and "moves" to help it continue to properly serve its new membership mix and sustain the club's momentum.

"We have to strike the right balance of staying 'mainstream traditional' for some of our members and being 'family casual' for others," Dietz says. "That puts a whole new emphasis on how we handle both day-to-day activities and special events."

"Our two mantras for this year are 'Find more ways to say yes' and 'Learn to serve members, when it's clear that's what they want, in 60 minutes or less,'" he continues.

"The first one is about staying on our toes with our events, so they'll all appeal to as wide a group as possible, and not just be 'cut and paste' repeats of what we've done in previous years."

"The second one, for speeding up service, is because of how many more families of four we see in our dining room," Dietz adds. "Our competition to get them to come to eat with us is all the family restaurants that are in the malls between their homes and our club. If we don't meet those families' timetables and get the turn of those groups that we need, we won't see them back here."

Leading the Leaders

While Dietz continues to keep Lakewood CC in step with change while strengthening its positioning for the future (the recently concluded fiscal year marked one of the club's best financial performances in its 54-year-history), he also sees the need to devote some of his boundless energy to the club indus-

try, to help address concerns that he and fellow managers share about properly developing the club managers of tomorrow.

"We need to work with younger managers—and also among ourselves and with our Boards and club owners—to help find the middle ground between the seven-day, 100-hour weeks many of us grew up in the business with, and what's going to be acceptable for future managers," Dietz says. "We have to do a better job of emphasizing how rewarding [club management] can be, but also find ways to change the perception that extreme inputs of time are required, and show that you can take vacations and have family time without impacting the member experience. Otherwise, we're going to continue to scare away good, and needed, talent."

Towards this end, Dietz has taken the lead, through his involvement with the Club Managers Association of America and its Washington, D.C.-area (National Capital) Chapter, in producing an annual "Masters Roundtable" seminar series that brings top club managers together from around the country for a day focused on leadership and development issues. (This year's Roundtable will be held at Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Md., on September 30.)

As an interesting personal development along these lines, Dietz also reports that at Lakewood, earning his bonus is now based, in small part, on using up his allotted time *off*. "That's reflective of how we have an understanding team among our Board and our membership," he says. "And it's something that I hope catches on throughout our industry."

C&RB

Ideas

**IMPLEMENTED SUCCESSFULLY AT
LAKEWOOD COUNTRY CLUB UNDER
ERIC DIETZ'S DIRECTION**



■ Member-guest tournament in 2012 enhanced with six action food stations built around an Olympics theme and by

converting a carryall golf cart into a mobile raw bar one day and a "lobster shack" the next.

■ To help create an atmosphere of acceptance and celebrate the club's diversity, separate annual Hanukkah and Santa Brunch events were blended successfully into one Winter Wonderland party that was open to all and encouraged community within the club.

■ Comedy nights are always consistent sellouts, attracting 220 guests.



Lakewood's 33,000-sq. ft. clubhouse features a "boutique hotel" interior lobby design.