

MCMAHON GROUP / CLUB & RESORT BUSINESS

2008 Excellence in Club Management Award Winner



# Bringing the Hills Alive

By Joe Barks, Editor

The North Hills Club in Raleigh, N.C., doesn't have a golf course. But the extended drought conditions that were plaguing other clubs in the golf-rich Piedmont region as a new season began last spring were also of grave concern to North Hills, which needs a reliable and affordable source of moisture to keep its 14 clay tennis courts, each of which must be watered twice a day, in prime condition.

C. W. Cook, the club's General Manager, doesn't have a rain-sensing bunion, but he still had a nagging feeling that the water situation was likely to get worse before it got better. And



From as soon as he arrived as North Hills' new GM in 2005, C. W. Cook has displayed a determined knack for finding ways to make full, innovative and profitable use of every part of the club property.

## Achievements

### AT NORTH HILLS CLUB UNDER C.W. COOK'S LEADERSHIP

- Directed demolition of 40-year-old clubhouse and construction of new, 25,000-sq. ft. clubhouse with fitness center, aerobic and massage therapy rooms, men's and women's locker rooms with steam, four a la carte dining rooms, executive meeting room, and full-service pro shop.
- Created internal marketing plan that brought in 120 members to reach full capacity (800) during construction and also created waitlist of nearly 100.
- Increased sales by 325% in grille room and 473% in banquet department.

■ Strengthened community connections, and expanded the horizons of member families, by reaching out to groups such as an African Children's Choir (above) and the local Boys & Girls Club (see photo, pg. 43), to make club facilities available and create valuable cultural exchanges in the process.



he wasn't going to just stand around with his hands spread to the heavens, hoping for a solution.

Rather, Cook convinced the club's Board that everyone needed to look in a different direction: down, even *way down*, if that's what it would take to drill a well on the property that could make North Hills self-sufficient for water use.

The drilling had to go 700 feet, but North Hills did eventually find a source to call its own on the property. And a week after the club began using its own well water, the drought had become severe enough for the city of Raleigh to impose water restrictions. "We got off the city system just in time," Cook reports. "Now we have a 10,000-gallon underground tank that we can pump from for all of our needs, including our pool. And when it does rain, we can collect the drainage."

During this entire process, no one at North Hills ever felt

PHOTOS COURTESY NORTH HILLS CLUB



Remembering valuable lessons he's learned from his mentors at other clubs, Cook has put a premium on employee recognition at North Hills, and has also instituted a regular personal-interest seminar series for staff, on topics such as credit scores and identity fraud.



they were taking a leap of faith in following Cook's lead—nor were they really surprised, or felt it was luck, that the payoff was so well-timed in beating the city restrictions. Because ever since C.W. Cook arrived in 2005 as North Hills' new GM, he has displayed a determination, and a knack, for finding innovative ways to make full and profitable use of every part of the club's property.

Because his concepts have proved to be so consistently on target, the club has made amazing strides during Cook's tenure (see Achievements box, pg. 40, and also "North Hills Club Gets Back in the Game," *C&RB*, December 2007). Cook's achievements have now also earned him recognition from his peers, as the 2008 recipient of the Excellence in Club Management Awards (co-sponsored by the McMahon Group and *Club & Resort Business*) in the City, Athletic or Specialty (non-golf) Club category.

### Getting Everything On a Roll

Touring the North Hills Club property with Cook, he points to rolltop windows, at the back of the new clubhouse, facing the pool, that have become the center of activity during the summer.

"We decided we didn't want food service at the pool to just be a satellite operation," he explains. "We didn't want to be limited to the traditional snack bar menu. We use a different order ticket and different, safer containers for the pool area, but those windows were added to the back of our main kitchen, and you can use them to order the same quality of food as in our dining rooms. Being able to have a Caesar salad poolside has been a huge hit.

"We use a 'reverse paging' system, using those vibrating coasters like you get in restaurants after you put your name in for a table," Cook adds. "Only this time,

we buzz you to let you know when your food's ready, and then you just come up to the window to pick it up."

When Cook and his staff saw that ordering at the windows was going to be especially popular with kids, they made another change on the spot. "We created a line just for kids, because it can get to be 10 deep when they're all up there getting their slushies together," he notes. "We didn't want that to stand in the way of adult members also being able to get what they want, when they wanted it."

North Hills did create a special pool menu last season, limiting it to a few, high-quality, low-labor items such as Angus burgers, with nothing costing more than \$3.50. "Even if this setting, you have to recognize that members still have other options and make sure you're competitive with the outside market," Cook says. "My peers [among other club managers] couldn't believe it would work, but in a four-month period, we did over \$200,000 from the new menu."

### Learning in the Trenches

Cook's open-minded and practical approach to club management, and his ability to successfully implement ideas (see box, pg. 43), has come by combining seat-of-the-pants instincts with formal training and mentoring. He didn't set out to make clubs his career, but fell upon the field while in the Air Force, when he was assigned to do the accounting for an officers' club and golf course at a base.

After leaving the service, Cook decided to pursue a career in clubs and obtained hospitality degrees from leading schools (Florida International and UNLV) while working his way up through management positions at a variety of top properties throughout the country. As Assistant Manager at the Governors Club in Chapel Hill, N.C., he says he

learned his single most important lesson from Andy Singleton (now GM of Mountain Air CC).

“He stressed that to succeed in this business and get to the point where you can effectively supervise a lot of different jobs, you have to make sure you know as much as you can about what each job involves,” Cook says. “That’s the only way you’ll really have the right amount of respect for everyone on your staff and what they do, and then to be able to get everyone to work effectively as a team.

“It didn’t hit me how important that was,” Cook adds, “until I had to learn what being a housekeeper was all about. It didn’t take long to find out just how tough it was, even for me, to keep moving all of those bulky comforters on and off the beds. That made me stop and think what it must be like for the 100-pound women on the staff.

“And I’ve tried to keep that in mind ever since. Before you’re going to suggest there might be a better way to do something, you’d better be sure you’ve already tried to do it yourself.”

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## Ideas IMPLEMENTED SUCCESSFULLY AT NORTH HILLS CLUB

- Raised the club’s profile as both a tennis center and community leader by hosting a pro circuit event (right) that benefitted the local Boys and Girls Club and included a free clinic for kids (below).
- Successful Family Nights on



Fridays incorporate complimentary childcare with themed buffets.

- “Fossil Dig” theme parties and “Mad Science” activities combine science education with entertaining kids’ programs.
- Survey Monkey software is used for frequent and quick (less than 10 questions) of members on a variety of subjects; feedback rates regularly hit 50%.
- “Lil’ Member” baby bibs created with club logo and provided to each new parent.

