

McMAHON GROUP / CLUB &amp; RESORT BUSINESS

## 2008 Excellence in Club Management Award Winner



# Human Interest Story

By Joe Barks, Editor

In the early 1970s, Charles (Chuck) Scupham graduated from the University of Denver with a degree in Political Science and a Minor in Journalism. He didn't yet feel like going to law school or running for office, so he decided to put his secondary field of study to use and go to work as a reporter for the *Rocky Mountain News*.

It wasn't long, though, before Scupham felt new passions tugging at him, at the same time he was growing disillusioned with the newspaper business. That sent him off on a new adventure studying in France and spending nearly a decade learning the wine and food businesses in that country, before returning to the States to work first in restaurants, and then in clubs.

Scupham soon embraced club management as the best fit for his chosen profession, because of how it offered the opportunity to blend his knowledge of fine wines and dining with the human interaction that fueled his original interest in journalism. He served as General Manager of Bent Creek Country Club (Lititz, Pa.) and the Country Club of Lansing (Mich.) before landing the GM position in 2003 at the prestigious Skokie Country Club in suburban Chicago (Glencoe, Ill.)

Scupham's accomplishments at Skokie CC then led to an ironic convergence of his original and current careers that confirmed he'd made the right moves and found the best place for his talents. During the same month that Scupham was honored by his peers as a 2008 recipient of the Excellence in Club Management Awards (co-sponsored by the McMahon Group and *Club & Resort Business*) in the Less than 600 Full-Privilege Members category, the *Rocky Mountain News* printed its last issue after 150 years of publication.

### Getting F&B On Course

When Scupham came to Skokie CC in 2003, the club enjoyed a storied golf reputation through its championship course, which dates back to the club's founding in 1897, was redesigned by Donald Ross in 1916, and hosted the U.S. Open won by Gene Sarazen in 1922.

A redesign of the course, directed by Ross specialist Ron Pritchard, had just been completed when Scupham arrived

## Achievements

AT SKOKIE CC UNDER CHUCK SCUPHAM'S LEADERSHIP

- Revamped junior sports program into eight-week schedule (four two-week sessions) offering half-days of instruction in golf, tennis and swimming. The program was so well-received in its first year, another two-week session was added for 2008; in both years, the program ran at nearly 95% capacity.



- Hired a true controller with a CPA and MBA who applied forecasting skills to 10-Year Long Range Planning Process; fiscal year was changed to begin on April 1, leading to greater budgeting precision.

- Directed Facilities Enhancement Plan to upgrade existing clubhouse, lower terrace, bar, ladies locker room and golf building. Used improved facilities to bring about a 20% increase in *a la carte* dinners over four-year period and to implement well-received casual dining, snack and bar concepts.

PHOTOS COURTESY SKOKIE CC





Skokie CC proudly retains its traditions at the same time it develops new ones through extra attention to youth programs. A reemphasis of its paddle tennis program in 2006 led to significant growth in winter team play.



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as GM. But the food and beverage offer still lagged far behind. Formal dining was average at best, and casual options consisted of "a pool snack bar with limited refrigeration and an outdoor gas grill used at lunch."

Recognizing the need to address these shortcomings, the Skokie membership had approved a \$9 million Facilities Enhancement Plan. A major portion of the funds would be spent on expanding the existing clubhouse to 55,000 square feet and adding a lower terrace and bar.

Under Scupham's direction, the club got the most out of its money upfront, and then again through maximum returns. His vision of the potential for the terrace area, which provides an elevated view of the course, led to the decision to split it into an upper terrace for full-menu dining, and a lower terrace with a new Ross Room bar featuring a more casual bar menu. He also upgraded the pool snack bar through a two-phase renovation that first added a full kitchen, and then air conditioning.

Once both the front- and back-of-



# Ideas IMPLEMENTED SUCCESSFULLY

AT SKOKIE CC UNDER CHUCK SCUPHAM'S LEADERSHIP

■ "Flicks and Floats" (see photo below) is a highlight of the club's pool season; last year, 120 kids plopped their loungecrafts into the water to watch "Bee Movie" at dusk after a buffet dinner.



■ "Camp Skokie" is a family cookout and campout on the golf course, with families pitching tents and sleeping under the stars. Activities include story tellers, fishing and marshmallow roasting. Breakfast is served the next morning at 7 AM. Last year, 175 campers attended.

■ After watching the numbers for its traditional New Year's Eve party dwindle year after year, the club went to a "Family New Year's Eve" approach, with an 8:30 PM balloon drop signaling midnight. Last year, 210 revelers took part in the early celebration.

the-house facilities had been improved, Scupham and his staff brought innovative new formats and menu concepts into play. Alternatives to traditional *a la carte* dining were introduced that included complimentary *bors d'oeuvres* with live music on Fridays, and homemade pizza and beer on Thursday nights. A new menu of 10 to 12 stand-alone casual dishes was also made available every night the club was open.

After first demonstrating the success of these casual concepts in the summer, particularly at the poolside venue, Scupham has pushed to extend them into all other seasons. "We were succeeding in getting younger members to come to the club with their children almost daily in the summer," he explains. "But after Labor Day, we'd only see them on holidays."

To try to change that pattern, this fall he introduced a new "Bistro 500" concept, featuring kid-friendly casual fare, in the clubhouse's downstairs dining space on Friday and Saturday nights. And like the other F&B changes that Scupham has directed since coming to Skokie, "Bistro 500" was well received as soon as it was introduced, and is likely to become another permanent addition to the club's overall dining mix.

All told, Skokie CC has seen its total number of meals served jump over 20% since 2004. During the summer months, between 200 and 300 members and guests now dine at the club each night, with at least 50 ordering from the bar menu. Key measures such as members served, dollars spent per member, and F&B sales per member all continued to trend upward through 2008.





Skokie CC hosts musical events year-round, culminating with a week-long Candlelight Choral gala during the Christmas season that brings nearly 2,000 people into the club.

### Old-School Definitions

While Chuck Scupham didn't go to hospitality school before entering club management, his journalistic training has helped him zero in on techniques for success in the field. One mantra he's relied on as a primary guiding principle was picked up from Dick Bruner, the industry educator and GM of the University Club of Michigan State University, whom Scupham got to know while at the Country Club of Lansing.

"Probably more than anything else, I've always found value in trying to operate by Dick's concept of 'leading while giving the impression of being led,'" Scupham says. "It's critical for the GM to be a team-builder and a consensus-builder before anything else. The days of trying to get results like the chef who throws knives in the kitchen just don't work anymore."

And by combining a reporter's observations with the practical experience he's gained over the years, Scupham has developed his own keen sense about the keys to effective club management that even the highest-ranking hospitality student would do well to heed.

"The quickest way for a GM to lose his or her job is to have the members decide they need to get their club back," he says. "You have to constantly focus on finding ways to get all members to participate, because it's their club, not yours. You have to keep giving people reasons to come out, and eliminate the reasons why they choose not to. You have to make sure your junior programs, for all sports and activities, aren't just viewed as babysitting functions, but have real value in terms of instruction and fun.

"When you and your staff can do those things consistently, you'll be in a much better position to make it through [challenging economic periods] when business might be down," Scupham says. "It won't be down at all, in fact, for those clubs that can keep finding ways to exceed expectations."

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