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2008 Excellence in Club Management Award Winner

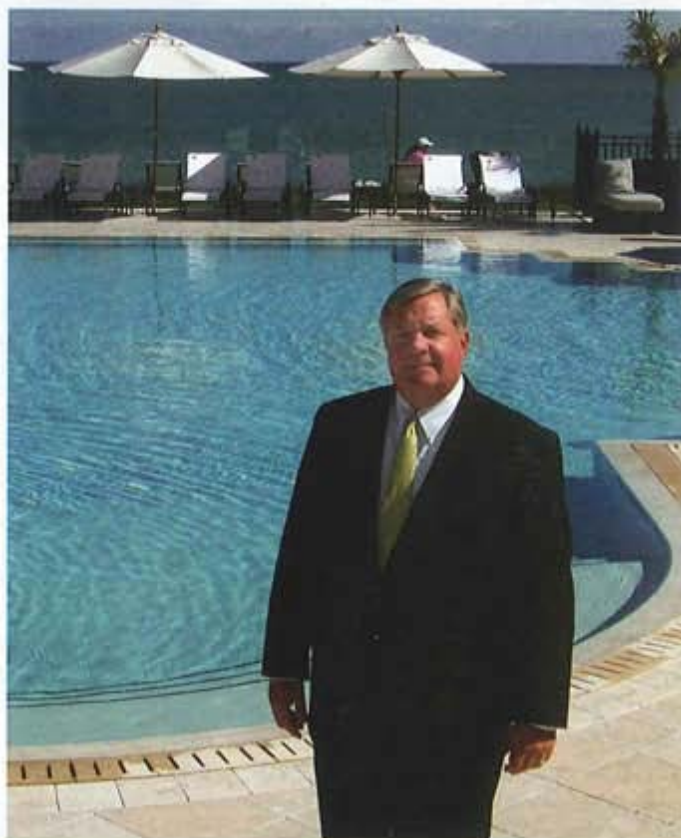


# The Look of Success

By Joe Barks, Editor

As he walks around the John's Island Club in Vero Beach, Fla.—and even when his rounds take him onto the sand of the property's Atlantic Ocean beachfront—General Manager Brian Kroh, CCM, usually stays in full business attire, not even removing his suit coat. Asked if he ever yields to a more casual look, especially in Florida's hottest months, Kroh says he tries not to, citing an important lesson imparted to him by one of his mentors in the club industry, Jim Brewer of the Los Angeles Country Club. "He stressed the value of always looking like you run the place," says Kroh.

Kroh is hardly a stuffed shirt, though—he also dons Santa Claus suits for the club's holiday parties, has put on Elvis wigs and sunglasses for Halloween affairs, and for the groundbreaking ceremony for John's Island's new Beach Club (see pg. 25),



he completed his outfit of crisp blazer, white shirt and tie with khaki shorts, flip-flops and a colorful lei.

Nor is Kroh anything close to an empty suit. In addition to the lessons about style that he's learned through 30 years of management experience at high-profile private clubs since earning a Hotel and Restaurant Administration degree from Oklahoma State University, Kroh has become well-known on his own as an innovator of real substance. And for all the ways in which he's looked good, in every sense of the term, Kroh earned recognition from his peers as the 2008 recipient of the Excellence in Club Management Award (co-sponsored by the McMahon Group and *Club & Resort Business*), in the 600 or More Full-Privileged Members category.

## Achievements

AT JOHN'S ISLAND CLUB UNDER BRIAN KROH'S LEADERSHIP

- Directed recovery from two hurricanes that each inflicted significant property damage in 2004; maintained dining service by setting up grills on Courtside Cafe patio, a limited-service facility.

- During construction of new Beach Club (see pg. 25), created temporary dining Pavilion on beach site; also added *a la carte* services at 19th Hole on golf side of property and converted formal ballroom in Golf Clubhouse to "Island Room" for casual dining. Overall impact to club F&B revenues during construction period was minimized.

- Created Adventure Island Camp, including activities such as parasailing, kayaking and hot-air balloon rides, to attract more families to traditional 4th of July celebration. Now in its sixth year, it has become so popular it's developed an annual waiting list.



john's island club

### Answering the Calls

When Kroh arrived in Vero Beach in 1996 to be John's Island's first-ever General Manager, he found he needed to quickly draw on everything he'd heard, seen, learned and conceived on his own about what makes for effective club management. The club, founded in 1969, was transitioning from developer-run to member-owned, and there was "a lot of division and animosity," he says, about the direction that John's Island should now take.

Before plunging into the big-picture pool, however, Kroh decided he needed to do something that would make an immediate statement about the kind of club he would now run.

"At places I'd worked like Los Angeles and Congressional Country Clubs, it was always stressed that their success and

PHOTOS BY DIANE JACOBS AND COURTESY JOHN'S ISLAND CLUB

reputation were based on maintaining a high-touch environment in every part of the operation," he recalls. "And at other clubs, I'd seen what a mistake it can be to lose the personal touch. So my first decision, the day I came [to John's Island], was to get rid of our auto-attendant telephone system. We went from no switchboard operator to two on duty at all times."

Such a small but powerfully symbolic change, Kroh says, quickly generated the right message and momentum among what he had already recognized to be a capable and eager-to-do-right staff. The proper service culture then soon began to take shape from there. Thirteen years later, Kroh takes pride in the long average tenure of his department heads, and also in how John's Island is now managed through a "flat organizational chart" where he has full confidence in other managers to direct things on their own as needed.

David Colclough, who has served as Assistant General Manager for the past six years, confirms that this is another area where Brian Kroh walks the talk. "He likes to surround himself with people who are at the top of their game," says Colclough. "He's not threatened by anyone, and in fact his attitude is clearly, 'Why be threatened, when having good people and letting them do what they do best can make the ship sail smoothly and make us all look better?'"

When the John's Island property took head-on hits from two hurricanes in 2004 within just three weeks, Colclough adds, the real value of this management approach and style was confirmed. "That's when everyone was able to show their true colors," he says. "And because of the calm focus that Brian had, and the way he easily delegated responsibilities, we all had a clear idea of what had to be done, and we could all contribute to getting everything back in working order in record time—even with the setback of the second storm coming so soon after the first. And the staff developed a strong sense of unity from that time that still serves us well."

### Never Knowing Enough

Even with the luxury of having a staff of such proven expe-

**The John's Island Club staff has learned, under hurricane- or construction-induced duress, to seamlessly transfer operations to any part of the property. Activities at the 1,400-member club range from the very traditional to the hair-raising.**

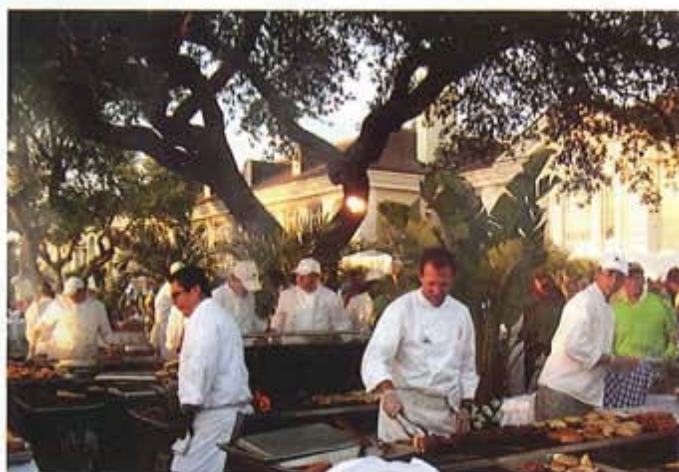


## Ideas IMPLEMENTED SUCCESSFULLY

AT JOHN'S ISLAND CLUB  
UNDER BRIAN KROH'S LEADERSHIP

■ Addressing a problem encountered at its old Beach Club of profusely sweating glassware that ruined menus, dripped on guests and created extra safety hazards, the John's Island staff, for the opening of its new Beach Club (see pg. 25), switched to insulated, stackable tumblers with the club logo (see photo). In addition to reduced damage and breakage, the tumblers also became a popular item in the club's retail shops.

■ To help overcome the hesitance of some members and guests about sitting outside on cool nights or windy days at the Beach Club (where 30% of all seating is outdoors), the club procured a supply of fleece blankets that are kept on racks and can be offered as comfortable, but not cumbersome, wraps.



## TODAY'S MANAGER

rience operate in such a stable management climate, Kroh still takes steps that make it clear that no one—including himself—is immune from the need to keep improving and learning more.

To prepare the John's Island team for the replacement of the Beach Club, Kroh established, a year in advance, a theme of "Season of Change." He then engaged the services of a "leadership development, executive coaching and talent management" consulting firm that specializes in working with corporations outside the hospitality realm.

This led to an introspective look, through employee surveys and interviews, into how even such a well-functioning team could find new ways to improve, especially as the challenges of the construction period approached.

The feedback from employees led to prioritized listings of "gap areas"—such as interdepartmental teamwork, or empowering staff to make immediate decisions—that were then used to refine training efforts and direct department heads on what they should emphasize within their own operations.

Throughout the process, parallel objectives for desired "team behaviors" and "leaders' behaviors" were established, to make it clear that everyone was part of the effort and no one could sit back



**Even as John's Island strengthens its position as a family-friendly club well-suited to appeal to emerging generations, Kroh and his team makes sure not to neglect activities that are important to those who have been a part of the scene for many years.**

and leave the need to keep improving to someone else.

"With Brian, it's all about getting people prepared to do the right thing," says Colclough. "And if you do something you feel was right, it won't be labeled a mistake. He may want to help you see how you could have made a better decision, but what you did won't be filed away as a big deal or a skeleton."

That's largely because Kroh also has a very clear-cut and straightforward way of determining how his staff, and himself, ultimately measure up.



"The best way I know for how to judge member satisfaction is to look at the patronage numbers," he says. "It's not all that scientific—if you know what members expect, and how to connect with them, the captains' reports on how all parts of the club are being used each day will tell you all you need to know about how you're doing."  
**C&RB**