It’s often said that you only get one chance to make a first impression. This adage typically refers to job interviews and blind dates, but a chance encounter between Nick Markel and Robert Josey was an unexpected start to what would become a fruitful mentor-mentee relationship.

When Markel and Josey first met, Markel was gainfully employed at Cherokee Town and Country Club in Atlanta. Attending a family birthday party at the property, Josey began perusing the trophy case set up in the Louise Suggs Room, looking for evidence of Suggs’ win at the Women’s Western Amateur in 1947, which was held at The Country Club in Pepper Pike, Ohio, where Josey is General Manager. Markel, then Assistant Manager at Cherokee, introduced himself to Josey and offered to open the cases and help search the clubhouse for memorabilia of the event. Though the two ultimately found no tournament keepsakes, Josey recalled thinking “what a nice and thoughtful young man.”

Years later, Markel applied and was hired for the Assistant Manager position at The Country Club. “When I think back to that fateful day at Cherokee, I realized that I ended up finding something more valuable than Suggs’ trophy—I found my future Assistant General Manager, mentee, and worthy ‘Rising Star’ nominee,” Josey wrote in an application that ultimately earned Markel that recognition through the 2014 Excellence in Club Management Awards (see box, pg. 40).

“Go-to Guy”
The same affable nature that made a lasting impression on Josey during their initial meeting has also made Markel well-suited for the member-oriented club industry, and has driven some of his greatest successes at The Country Club.

Described by Josey as a “natural leader,” Markel has established a reputation among his staff as the “go-to guy” for help, both professionally and personally. “He encourages everyone to better

Achievements at The Country Club with Nick Markel’s Involvement/Direction

• In the nearly four years (in September) that Markel has been at The Country Club, food-and-beverage revenue has risen by approximately 17%; General Manager Rob Josey attributes this in part to Markel’s training program, which incorporates weekly training games and periodic tests to help staff focus on quality service and product knowledge.
• Created and expanded internship program, beginning with one all-encompassing position and growing to four distinct positions: club management, catering and events, soda grill, and a rotational/operational intern (for students who haven’t served or tended bar, but need the experience before going into management).
• Implemented a club-wide recycling program that is cost-neutral.
• Currently overseeing $800,000 cart-storage building project.
themselves, whether through local CMAA chapter education, or national programs,” Josey says.

Markel’s ability to effectively mentor and train staff has contributed to The Country Club’s 17% growth in food-and-beverage revenue over nearly four years, Josey says. He has revamped and streamlined the staff training program to focus on quality service, product knowledge, and instilling passion. Before new employees step onto the club floor, they take an Employee Orientation Program that Markel personally presents.

All of that training is kept fun through weekly training games that emulate “Jeopardy!” and “Chutes & Ladders,” plus quarterly whole-staff training days, and weekly quizzes. Further incentive comes from the opportunity to earn “Country Cash,” which rewards outstanding performance with prizes ranging from gift cards to new flat-

Markel (back row, second from left in a suit), has developed a reputation as the “go-to guy” among The Country Club staff.

Honoring Excellence

The Excellence in Club Management (ECM) Awards were established by the McMahon Group, Inc., the St. Louis-based consulting firm, in 1997 and have been co-sponsored by Club & Resort Business since 2006.

The annual awards are selected through nominations submitted on behalf of qualified candidates by other parties. Award recipients are selected solely on the basis of their achievements at the club they currently manage; “lifetime achievements” are not considered.

Awards in four categories are given each year:
- The James H. Brewer Award, for a manager of a Country/Golf Club with 600 or more full-privilege members
- The Mead Grady Award, for a manager of a Country/Golf Club with fewer than 600 full-privilege members
- The Mel Rex Award, for a manager of a City, Athletic or Specialty (Non-Golf) Club
- The “Rising Star” Award for an assistant club manager

A Selection Committee comprised of a peer group of leading club managers conducts the judging for the ECM Awards; the McMahon Group and Club & Resort Business are not involved in the selection of the winners.

The Selection Committee for the 2014 Awards was chaired by Kevin Vitale, CCM, General Manager/COO of Baltusrol Golf Club, Springfield, N.J. A full listing of judges, in addition to information on past winners and on how to nominate candidates for future years’ awards, can be found at the special website for the ECM Awards, www.clubmanageraward.com.

The deadline for submitting nominations for the 2015 ECM Awards is November 20, 2015.

In addition to in-depth articles in Club & Resort Business that detail the achievements of each ECM winner, individual presentation ceremonies are held at their clubs. All winners are also honored at the Excellence in Club Management Awards Dinner, held each year in conjunction with the Club Managers Association of America World Conference. The 2015 Awards Dinner will be held next February in San Diego, Calif., and will once again be sponsored by ClubCorp, Denehy Club Thinking Partners, Preferred Club, Toro and Yamaha Golf Car.
screen TVs.

“We spend so much time here, there’s no point in doing it if it isn’t any fun,” Markel says.

Helping to pay it forward, Markel created the club’s paid internship program, which started as one all-encompassing position in 2012 and has since grown to four distinct positions: club management, catering and events, soda grill, and a rotational/operational intern. The program has proved to be a valuable pipeline for future club employees—two current Service Managers are former interns, one hired upon completion of the program and the other after graduation.

Markel’s work with employees has benefited the club’s bottom line as well. Overtime pay has been reduced by creating a more flexible workforce, encouraging supervisors to cut back on staff levels when business volume doesn’t warrant it, and streamlining and standardizing the scheduling process.

“We cross-train employees, so they can work in many departments and be utilized all over, as needed,” Markel says. The overall number of hires has increased so more employees don’t need to work more than 40 hours a week, which has improved their overall quality of life outside of work.

Of course, Markel’s work also benefits The Country Club membership. As a “young, technology-savvy person,” Josey notes, Markel has taken the lead in keeping the club’s website up to date and handling weekly e-blasts sent to members. He has redesigned digital templates to reflect the club’s brand and image, and promoted member participation in Clubster, a private social network app, in part by offering free drinks to any who came by the club’s bar and showed the newly installed app on their phone.

“We have to be constantly evolving and changing, making everything better year after year by figuring out what worked and what didn’t,” Josey says. “Nick has really taken the lead on this, and we get praised by the membership for our creative and active event schedule.”