



# Star of the Show

By Joe Barks, Editor



**S**avvy club managers quickly learn there's plenty of expertise within their memberships that they can draw on to help them make good decisions when running their clubs. Normally, this means availing yourself of counsel that attorneys or executives in insurance, construction and other businesses can provide on personnel or facilities issues.

But when your club is surrounded by major Hollywood studios and includes many entertainment-industry leaders as members, it makes sense to also seek out some of that available brainpower to help fill your annual events calendar, too.

That's the thought that occurred in 2010 to Lance Sabella, General Manager of Lakeside Golf Club in Burbank, Calif., when he was looking for ways to bring new excitement to the club's events schedule—and new sizzle to its revenues line.

Sabella worked with the club's directors to form a new non-Board level, standing Special Events & Programming Committee. "The committee's charge was to think beyond traditional club events and come up with different ideas that would be fun, while still fitting the club's philosophy," says Sabella.

When it came to finding good candidates to serve on the committee, "it wasn't like we were starting from scratch," Sabella adds. "We were fortunate to have very qualified members from the motion picture and production businesses who could



Lakeside members can now get their laughs, kicks, spikes and scratches on a regular basis, thanks to the club's expanded lineup of unique events and activities (see details, pgs. 48-49).



PHOTOS COURTESY LAKESIDE GC

not only come up with creative ideas, but also had excellent relationships in the entertainment industry to help us execute them.”

The new committee was encouraged, Sabella says, to “push it a little bit,” to the point where it wouldn’t expect Lakeside’s Board to approve every idea it proposed. But already, it has conceived three smash (and now annual) hits in Fight Night, Comedy Night and Pool Night (see box, opposite page, and photos, pg. 47).

Another concept, Theater Night, featuring a one-man play by comedian and club member Tom Dreesen, who warmed up Frank Sinatra’s audiences for many years, was added this year and ran for two nights in the Lakeside ballroom, with crowds of 175 and 110.

Sabella himself has earned rave reviews for directing flawless implementation of the committee’s ideas, which are much more elaborate in their setups, and call for a higher degree of cross-department coordination, than your average club get-together (each event involves multiple stages of high-end food-and-beverage service).

And the fact that Sabella and his staff pulled off such ambitious new events in the same year Lakeside was undergoing a major golf course renovation (see box below), as well as a clubhouse lobby and dining room remodeling project, only further sealed the case for his recognition as the 2011 co-winner of The Mead

Grady Award, in the category of Country/Golf Clubs with Fewer Than 600 Full-Privilege Members, for the Excellence in Club Management Awards co-sponsored by the McMahon Group and *Club & Resort Business*.

**Long-Running Performance**

While 2011 was an especially eventful and accomplished year for Lance Sabella, it also served to extend his remarkably successful run since coming to Lakeside in 2004.

“Since Lance’s arrival, the club has not experienced an operating loss,” notes the club’s President, Brian Jackson. “Under his leadership, the staff has adopted a prevailing attitude that they are the stewards of the members’ money and must exercise a great deal of discretion and discipline when spending it.”

Much of that attitude has been forged, Jackson adds, through a bottom-up, zero-based budgeting system, instituted by Sabella after coming to Lakeside, that places responsibility, and accountability, at the departmental level.

“This is a far cry from each manager being handed their budget by the controller,” Jackson notes. “With this model, each manager becomes keenly aware of their departmental needs and goals.” So keen, in fact, that even in such an active year as 2011, Sabella and his management team operated tightly enough to come in \$200,000 under budget, mak-

ing it possible to issue a refund credit to members who had been assessed for the course renovation. “This will serve to build credibility for future projects and reinforce the ability of [the staff] to manage [them],” Jackson notes.

Sabella acknowledges that his ascent to the helm of a well-established equity club like Lakeside, which was founded in 1924, did not follow the most conventional career path. He initially cut his club industry teeth working in membership sales for a golf management company, before eventually moving into general management with Wood Ranch Golf Club in Simi Valley, Calif., where he was General Manager for three years before coming to Lakeside.

But Sabella now credits that management-firm experience with developing the performance-based discipline he’s applied with such success at Lakeside. “It was invaluable for what I learned about labor efficiencies and other aspects of controlling operations and costs,” he says.

“In my experience all members, regardless of the economic climate or their own personal financial situations, appreciate and expect that great care is given to maximizing the money they spend at the club,” Sabella adds. “Achieving that while providing a first-class experience is challenging yet greatly rewarding. I’m fortunate to have a great team of managers to help me fulfill that vision.” **C&RB**

**Achievements**

**AT LAKESIDE GOLF CLUB UNDER LANCE SABELLA'S LEADERSHIP**

- Renovation of golf course, including installation of new irrigation system, new fairway grass, cart paths, tees, curbing and new tree plan, completed in 2011 on time and under budget (\$6.5 million). A series of nine-hole routings were kept open (and rated, with scorecards) so members would always be able to play during the project. Members enjoyed the novelty of the new routings so much that actual lost revenue during the six-month project was \$100,000 less than forecasted, contributing to a rebate of some of the project assessment.
- Members’ volleyball



league (see photo, pg. 47) is held on Wednesday nights from May through September on three grass courts. Average attendance exceeds 300 per night, including family members, guests and non-participating members. Play is combined with themed buffets and outside bar service, including wine by the glass.

- Food sales and beverage sales have each increased 22% since 2004, allowing the club to be open for service one additional night.
- After “Blue Ribbon Committee” was formed to help identify new member candidates and secure their needed sponsorships, without compromising admission standards, membership sales increased significantly in three straight years.



## Ideas

IMPLEMENTED SUCCESSFULLY AT LAKESIDE GOLF CLUB  
UNDER LANCE SABELLA'S DIRECTION

- **The Lakeside Chili Cook-off**, a long-time Labor Day event, had seen participation decline to the point where it was not held for four years. It was revived in 2011 by adding a classic car show component (see photo above) and expanding the chili competition to include themed tents and entries by club committees, in addition to individual members. Over 350 members and guests attended.
- A new non-Board level, standing **Special Events**

**& Program Committee** was created to conceive new revenue-generating events that went beyond traditional club functions. The Committee developed:

- **Fight Night (Rumble on the Range)**, with sanctioned professional boxing and MMA bouts held in a ring set up on the driving range. Over 800 members and guests attended the 2011 event.
- **Comedy Night**, a private show featuring performers such as Ron White and Tom Dreesen in an intimate comedy club setting. Over 250 attended 2011's sold-out show.
- **Pool Night**, with the main dining room converted into a "pool hall" with 12 tables. Over 300 attended. *(See photos of all events on pg. 47.)*

# AD

**RUNOVER**