



The Right Hand for the Ranch

By Joe Barks, Editor

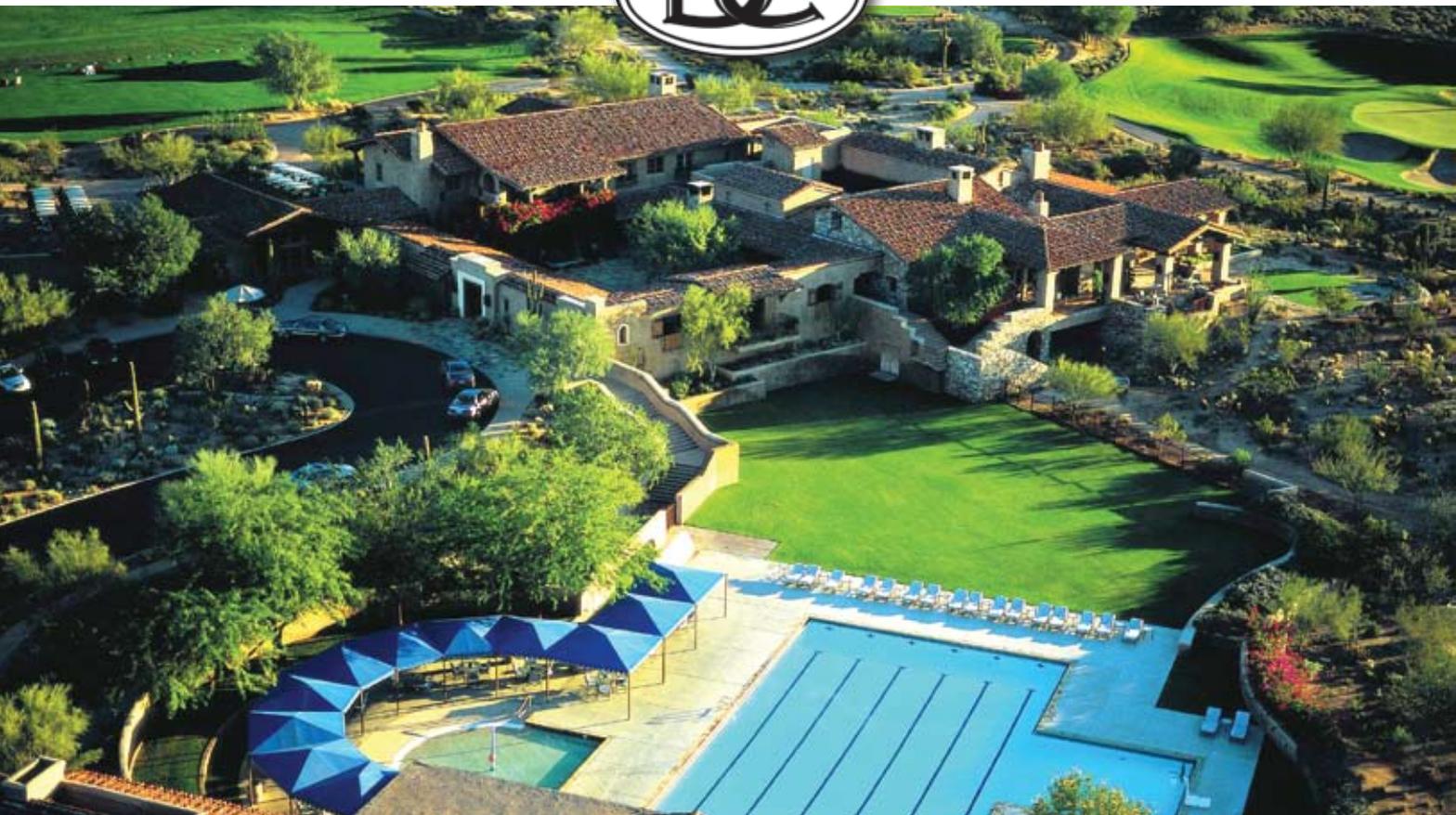
When one door closes, another opens—but all too often there is a long hallway in between.” That observation from *The Ultimate Anti-Career Guide* certainly didn’t apply—at least where distance was concerned—to the situation Paul Skelton, CCM, found himself in at the beginning of 2010. Skelton had been told by the developer of The Club at Seven Canyons in Sedona, Ariz., where he was Vice President/Chief Operating Officer, that the struggles caused by the recession and real estate crash had put the property, and Skelton’s job, in jeopardy.

But almost as soon as he heard that message, Skelton got another one: The Country Club at DC Ranch, in Scottsdale, Ariz., wanted to talk to him about becoming its new General

Prosperity has returned to The Country Club at DC Ranch under Paul Skelton’s direction, and members are now considering a \$3.8M clubhouse renovation/expansion.



PHOTOS COURTESY THE CC AT DC RANCH





The Country Club at DC Ranch's 35,000-sq. ft. Hacienda Clubhouse opened in 1998. A proposed 3,000-sq. ft. addition would create a new dining venue to take advantage of south elevation views.

Manager/COO. Skelton accepted the position, and physically, the only change when getting to work now involved “taking a left turn instead of a right.”

While the change in direction was minimal, however, the path leading to DC Ranch was littered with land mines. The club had been ravaged by the same recessionary forces, and as he reported for his new job, Skelton inherited poor operating results, a mandate to bring in a new Director of Golf, Executive Chef and Director of Tennis (among others), lingering legal issues from the club's recent separation from its developer—and 130 memberships on the exit list.

Fast-forward two years, and every road leading to The Country Club at DC Ranch now glitters with unimpeded, warm welcomes. And for his leadership in implementing strategies and ideas that brought about a remarkable turnaround (see boxes, this page and pg. 50), Paul Skelton has perhaps the most impressive achievement to add to his already distinguished 35-year career in club management (which includes two years as President of the Club Managers Association of America). He is the 2012 co-recipient of The Mead Grady Award, for Country/Golf Clubs with Fewer than 600 Full-Privilege Members, as part of the Excellence in Club Management Awards co-sponsored by the McMahon Group and *Club & Resort Business*. (Skelton shares the 2012 Grady Award, which is determined by judging from a selection committee of a peer group of club managers, with Eric Dietz, CCM, PGA, General Manager/CEO of Lakewood Country Club in Rockville, Md.; Dietz will be featured later this year in *C&RB*.)

Lessons to Work By

Looking back at the circumstances surrounding how he and The Country Club at DC Ranch came together, Skelton says they confirm the value of abiding by two other oft-quoted axioms about career development: “Timing is everything,” and “Never say never.”

In Skelton's case, the “never” was a vow to not get involved again with member-owned club situations. But while he says he was “absolutely concerned about a number of red flags” that were on prominent display as he looked towards Scottsdale, he also saw good signs among the directors and members of DC

Achievements

AT THE COUNTRY CLUB AT DC RANCH UNDER PAUL SKELTON'S DIRECTION

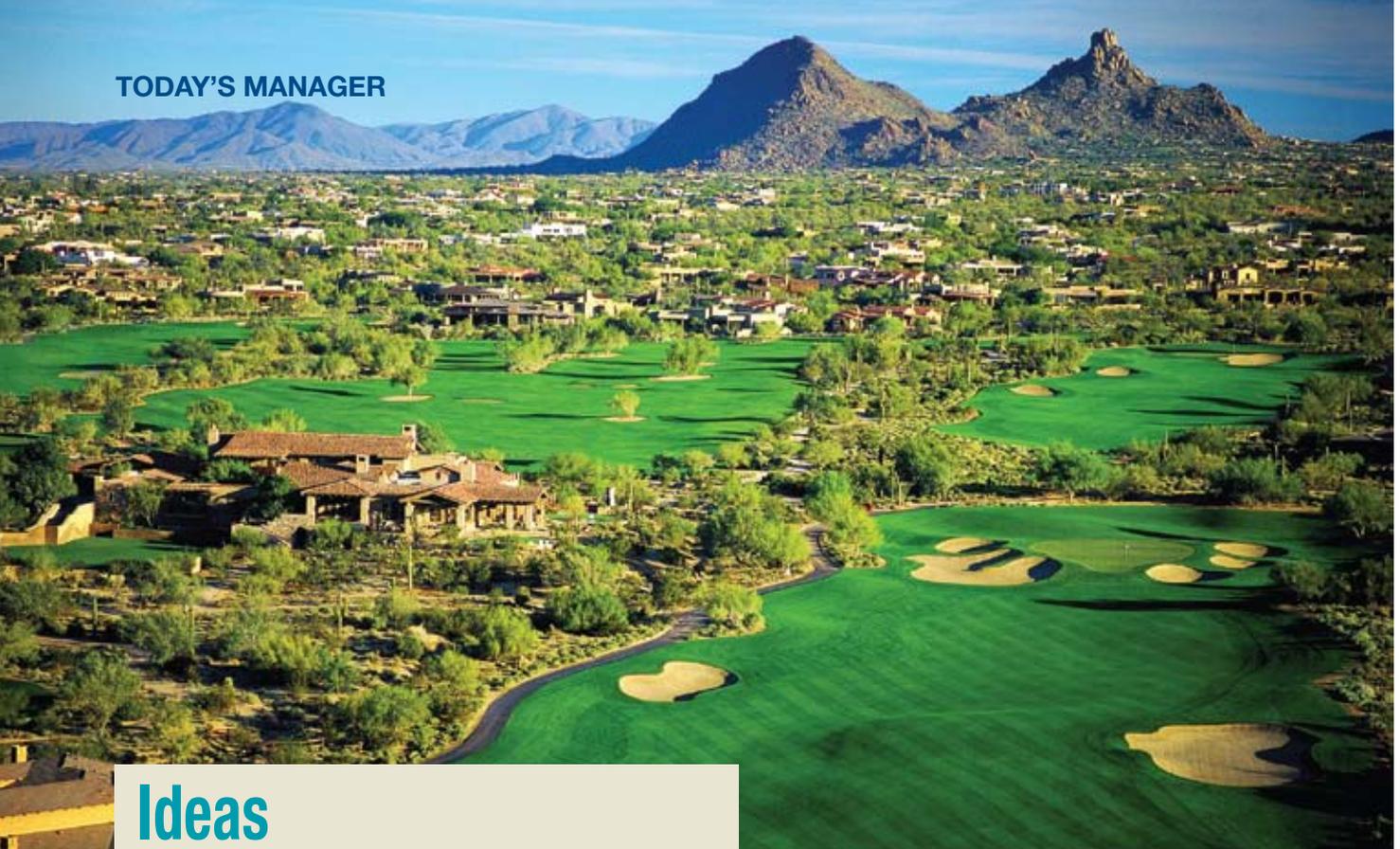


Golf rounds at DC Ranch increased more than 30% in two years thanks to concerted promotional efforts by Skelton and new Director of Golf Dick Hyland. March 2013 saw the club top 4,000 rounds, the first month that level had ever been reached.

- Market-based membership sales program, implemented in fall of 2010, sold over 130 memberships, eliminating the resignation list and minimizing bad debt from non-performing memberships.
- Club achieved positive cash-flow position with over \$2 million in cash reserves and no debt in less than two years.
- Golf rounds increased more than 30% in two years.
- Total food-and-beverage revenues increased 29% from fiscal year 2010 to FY 2012.
- Dining satisfaction survey conducted in spring of 2012 showed that over 83% of respondents were using the club for dinner at least one or two times a month, and over 70% indicated they were very satisfied or satisfied with all aspects of the dining experience. Both ratings represented significant improvement over numbers from a similar survey conducted in 2009.
- Employee survey in 2012 showed that 94% of employees liked their job and were proud to work for the club.



The tennis program at DC Ranch has been “growing rapidly,” Skelton says, and facilities that now include six championship hard courts, five of which are lighted, would get a \$300,000 upgrade as part of the \$3.8 million capital proposal now before the membership.



Ideas

IMPLEMENTED SUCCESSFULLY AT THE COUNTRY CLUB AT DC RANCH UNDER PAUL SKELTON'S DIRECTION



Empty patios are a distant memory at DC Ranch, thanks to the popularity of new outdoor F&B events, even in the slowest parts of the offseason.

- Mid-summer men's and women's member-guest tournaments, named "The Inferno" and "The Scorch-er" to help show that fun would be had despite the time of year, provided "low-season" boosts in member participation and enhanced year-round residents' experience.
- Five-dollar Burger Nights (on Thursdays, also featuring handmade pizzas cooked in a wood-fired oven) and Taco Tuesdays (\$6 for all-you-can-eat) have made weekday nights "must attend" events at the club, regularly drawing 200 or more people.
- Front-of-house service-related issues addressed by hiring Food and Beverage Service Manager to elevate pre-shift training and on-floor supervision.

Amending club bylaws so original membership rights could be waived and market-based membership sales could be implemented transformed DC Ranch, Skelton says, from having "134 people who needed or had to get out, to 134 active members using the club."

Ranch that convinced him they were ready to take the bold steps needed to begin to reverse the club's fortunes—and then to let him take it from there.

The boldest involved amending club bylaws so original membership rights could be waived and a market-based membership sales program could be implemented. Like many clubs in similar situations at the time, DC Ranch had tried initiation-fee adjustments that had failed to yield desired results. But the membership stepped up to adopt the market-based program, and it quickly brought about a remarkable transformation.

"We went from 134 people who needed or had to get out, to 134 active members using the club," Skelton says. "The issue today, in fact, is how to manage how busy we've become. In March of this year, we had over 4,000 golf rounds, the most ever experienced in a single month."

Under Skelton's direction, other aspects of DC Ranch life—most notably tennis and F&B—have experienced similar revivals, to the point where the membership is now poised to take another major step designed to take the club to unprecedented levels. Ballots were sent out in April for a vote on a \$3.8 million project, the bulk of which would be spent, Skelton says, on a "major refreshment" of DC Ranch's signature Hacienda Clubhouse. That part of the project would add 3,000 sq. ft. and provide a significant boost to the club's F&B operation.

"We'd redo the kitchen so its layout would be more efficient," says Skelton. "And we'd add square footage to take advantage of the setting at our south elevation for a new dining venue.

"We'd probably increase F&B volume by 25% to 30%," he adds. "But as we've said in the town hall meetings about the project, it's not about getting bigger, it's about getting better."

Which is another maxim that can now also be applied to Paul Skelton's career.

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