MARK SNURE – THE MEAD GRADY AWARD

All Accounted For

With the right combination of firm financial controls, facility improvements and fun for members and staff, Mark Snure has led the restoration of Riviera Country Club's lofty standing.

Throughout his 37-year career in club management, Mark Snure has drawn inspiration and guidance from a variety of thoughts and insights on what leads to success in the profession, including many things he's learned on his own (see "In His Own Words," right).

But the most constant source of guidance behind Snure's personal success has always been these words, written 30 years before he entered the profession and now framed and displayed prominently in his office as general manager of Riviera Country Club in Coral Gables, Fla.:

A Private Club

"A club is a haven of refuge and accord in a world torn by strife and discord."

"Is a place where kindred spirits gather to have fun and make friends."

"Is a place of courtesy, good breeding and good manners."

"Is a place expressly for camaraderie, merriment, good will and good cheer."

"It humbles the mighty, draws out the timid and casts out the sorehead."

"And is one of the noblest inventions of mankind."

—Robert Dedman, ClubCorp Founder, 1957

"It may sound 'cornbally,' but it still really is the truth—it's the best reminder of why what we do for the member is the key," Snure says in explaining why he keeps Dedman's words in plain view.

That reminder first became front-of-mind for Snure in the early days of his career, which he began as a maitre d' for a ClubCorp property and went on to spend 13 years with the management firm, the last six as General Manager of La Cita Country Club and Resort in Titusville, Fla. He credits his time with the company (which recently rebranded as Invited) for ingraining business perspectives and techniques into his club management approach and abilities and providing an invaluable boost to his career trajectory as he moved on to general manager/chief operating officer positions at member-equity clubs (Gulf Stream Golf Club in Delray Beach, Fla., International Town and Country Club in Fairfax, Va., and then Riviera in 2007).

In His Own Words: Mark Snure's Keys to Excellence in Club Management

"Long-range planning is very simple: You put one foot in front of the other and follow good solid business principles, so you don't live outside what you're capable of."

"You have to run a club like a business, and not like it's nobody's business."

"It's amazing what you can accomplish when nobody cares who gets the credit."

"You will lose all credibility if you don't come to the defense of your staff when it's needed."

Restoring the Luster

Riviera Country Club, and the property it occupies, have a historic standing dating to when The Biltmore Hotel and its two Donald Ross golf courses were built in the 1920s to draw interest to Coral Gables, one of the first planned communities in the U.S. that was created just outside of Miami by real estate developer George Merrick. While one of the Ross courses had to be closed within a year, the stately Biltmore soon became a world-renowned attraction, and its reputation spawned a private club that attracted many of the Miami area's leading citizens.

During World War II, however, the hotel was acquired by the federal government, which closed the affiliated club operation. When the club's leadership learned that a nearby tract that included 17 holes from the surviving Ross course was available for sale, it arranged for a group of 25 members to sell bonds that led to the founding of Riviera Country Club in 1945.

Riviera's membership grew through the rest of the century and the club became established as a social and recreational hub that drew much of its appeal from its convenient location and connection

to now-flourishing Coral Gables (home to the University of Miami) as well as The Biltmore, which was revived under private ownership as a luxury destination. The iconic hotel, now with National Historic Landmark status, can be viewed from Riviera's course (see photo below), which is also made available to hotel guests.

Upon arriving at Riviera in 2007, however, Mark Snure found that he quickly needed to shift the business acumen he had acquired and honed from his previous experience with ClubCorp and elsewhere into overdrive. While the golf course, clubhouse and other facilities were all showing signs of neglect, the bigger issue that was threatening to send Riviera into "a mini-death spiral," Snure says, was simply that "no one was paying attention to where the money was going."

"There was mismanagement in every area," he adds. "Schedules were not posted, there was no purchase order system, and no receiving or invoice-processing protocols. The operation was basically running on its own, with little supervision."

Taking Control

Fortuitously, Snure found that Riviera had made the wise decision shortly before his arrival to bring in Daniel Pella as its new controller. Having previously been a senior financial analyst with the Burger King Corporation and a senior auditor with Grant Thornton LLP, Pella could contribute valuable forensic accounting skills to the cause. "He may not have known how to run a club, but he knew how to track costs and expenses," Snure says.

To add more firefighting power, Snure hired Barry Herman (now general manager of Interlachen Country Club in Winter Park, Fla.) to be Riviera's clubhouse manager and a new executive chef, Gerard Lewis. Together, Snure says, the new leadership team set out to "actively monitor the areas that were obviously out of the percentage range of acceptable performance: food and beverage, house maintenance, golf and overall payroll."

"It took time, but we gradually instituted new operational checks and balances so we could control what was being purchased, received and who was getting paid," Snure says. "We established an accounts receivable procedure, including a collection protocol and dunning process, [to address an] over-120-day balance that was north of $500,000 on a $10 million grossing club. We also had the accounts receivable process added to our first amendment of the club bylaws.

"We brought the club on budget after the first 16 months and have reported consistent figures to budget ever since," Snure says. "Even in the skimpier years where we couldn't increase dues, we hung on to whatever efficiencies we had gained through expense controls."

New Recipes for Success

The financial turnaround for Riviera's food-and-beverage operation was especially striking. "As we pursued the controls and better management, we were able to do the same volume in F&B by the end of the 2008 fiscal year on $700,000 less in expenses," Snure reports. "Without exception, F&B has since contributed that efficiency on a go-forward basis to the bottom line, minus pay increases." And as the efficiencies and costs improved, so did what Riviera could provide to its members on the dining side.

"We looked at the menus and services being provided and added several items to expedite service and address operations in our kitchens, which were in dilapidated condition," Snure says. "We established a lunchtime buffet with hot entrees, soups, salads, sushi, a carving station and desserts that is now one of the most popular offerings in the club. We introduced a price-point-driven Sunday brunch and Burger & Beer Night and they can each now experience up to 600 covers on any given Sunday.

"As we slowly improved the service and food quality, the members' patronage grew," Snure reports. F&B sales that totaled a little over $1.6 million at Riviera in 2008 now exceed $5.3 million.

Paving the Way

Snure also credits Riviera's member leadership for quickly getting on board to contribute to the turnaround, after seeing how he and his team had delivered $1.5 million to the club's bottom line in Snure's first year as GM. The board and membership's appreciation and enthusiasm for what was being accomplished, coupled with the cost savings and added

Ideas & Achievements

Implemented at Riviera Country Club under Mark Snure's Leadership

- At the start of 2024, the club had $23 million of cash on hand, $2 million of which was set aside as board-designated funds. Investment of $9 million in Treasury bills yielded $550,000 in accumulated interest income.
- Renovated Family Grille dining room, renamed "The Grille," won two awards from the American Society of Interior Designers—1st place in the Renovation category and 2nd place in the Restaurant/Lounge/Bar category. The new space, previously an informal poolside venue that primarily served younger members and families, was redesigned to reflect the style of a "19th hole" venue and has been well-received by membership, with a forecasted net of $4 million for 2024.

- A board-approved resolution was passed to elevate maintenance of the club's renovated golf course based on a benchmark study submitted by the club staff. Where the golf course maintenance budget prior to the renovation was $1.7 million and the staff had 10 employees, the budget is now $2.85 million with a staff of 20. Closures of the course to accomplish necessary cultural practices were increased from seven days per year to 70. Rounds played have increased from 24,000 in 2016 to 35,000, with significant growth in ladies, junior and guest play.
- Croque Madame! breakfast at club rated as "best power breakfast" in city of Coral Gables.
- $300,000 set aside annually by the club for employee incentives. The number-one criteria for earning bonuses is being on time. Some staff now earn from $20,000 to $30,000 more per year in bonus pay.
- Upon retirement, long-tenured employees are given the equivalent of one week's pay per year and/or one year of their total salary, along with a member and employee send-off party, with members taking up a collection for the retiree on their own.

revenues that were being accumulated, helped to pave the way for a $10 million renovation of the Ross course by Kipp Schulties that had its grand opening at the start of 2016, and a new $37 million clubhouse (see photo, left) unveiled less than three years later.

"Operational surpluses alone have contributed over $12 million to the bottom line, and membership initiatives and added dues after the renovation have also contributed heavily to our financial success," Snure says. "Along with mortgage fees that the membership adopted for loans on the golf course and clubhouse, in 2021 President Rick Bajandas realized the club would not be able to survive long-term on initiation-fee income and proposed a separate fee for depreciation and capital accrual for future improvements and replacements.

"The board unanimously agreed, and we now have over $20 million in cash available for future projects. That all comes from great volunteer leadership that understands how a business really runs."

The next targets for how those funds will be used at Riviera are a proposed new Tennis Center (see rendering below) and a Golf Learning Center on the driving range. The Tennis Center is currently in the permitting process and Snure and the club's leadership are excited about how it will continue to expand Riviera's appeal and ensure its growth and relevance for future generations. "We're definitely not a retirement club," Snure assures.

Caring For Those Who Care

Another critical component behind Riviera's resurgence has been how Snure and his management team have continually emphasized the importance of taking steps to boost staff engagement, increase motivation, express appreciation for contributions to the club's growth and have employees share in its success. In addition to the ongoing bonus and retirement-recognition benefits listed in the "Ideas and Achievements" sidebar (see pg. 20), other human resource initiatives that have helped Riviera assemble and direct a staff that provides its membership with exceptional experiences have included:

- Performance-based raises that not only mitigate "claims bias" but also help all employees understand the key aspect of their jobs and create consistency across teams.
- Annual bonuses that are provided to all staff and not tied to performance metrics, to foster goodwill and promote a positive culture as a celebratory reward that benefits all employees.
- A "Golden Handcuffs" program to retain key employees that can include mortgage-share housing agreements or assistance, as well as investment plans.
- Support of advanced education or citizenship processes in addition to professional development.
- Health-and-wellness programs that extend beyond insurance coverage to also promote physical and mental health and combat burnout, including a work-life balance employee assistance program, emergency travel assistance, preparation of wills, and cost-free access to a psychologist.

The most effective perk of all, however, has most likely been the full slate of parties and outings that Riviera employees can partake in throughout the year, including bowling and trips to Miami Marlins baseball games (see photos above), as well as full-scale holiday gatherings.

"Relaxed environments are the best way to increase staff synergy," Snure believes. "With clubs it's easy to have everyone spend all their time running around completing tasks or staring at a screen, with very little communicating. Taking people away from their usual environments allows them to have real-life, in-person conversations and interaction. And at the end of the day, it's just important for everyone to have a good time." ■