STEVEN FREUND – THE JAMES H. BREWER AWARD

Checking Right In

Through his leadership in directing the transformation of The Landings Golf & Athletic Club, Steven Freund quickly proved he was much more than a "hotel guy."

As he concluded his remarks when accepting The James H. Brewer Award during the National Club Association's 2024 National Club Conference (see pg. 12), Steven Freund thanked the club industry, as represented by the prominent group of managers and executives in attendance, for "taking in a hotel guy."

The presentation of the Brewer Award, however, really marked how the club world expressed its appreciation for all that Freund has contributed to the pursuit of excellence in club management, since bringing his 20 years of experience with Ritz-Carlton properties to serve as Executive Director of The Landings Golf & Athletic Club (LGAC) in Savannah, Ga. in 2010.

After arriving at The Landings, Freund had little time to adjust to any differences he encountered in his new hospitality segment—but he would be under the gun immediately to demonstrate his club management chops.

As he wrote in a message to the member-owners of

In His Own Words: Steven Freund's Keys to Excellence in Club Management

"An organization will never be what its people are not; people will never be what their leaders are not."

"All improvement happens project by project, and in no other way."

"Failure to evolve, improve and remain relevant has greater risk than pushing the envelope a bit too hard."

"The best organizations realize that standing still is competitively moving in reverse."

"Train your staff well so that they can further their careers, but treat them so well that they want to stay."

The Landings earlier this year, in a special issue of the property's *Our Club* magazine that commemorated its 50th anniversary, "I admit that 14 years ago, I was not certain what our Club would look like when we reached this milestone.

"In 2010, our Club was ravaged by the Great Recession," Freund related in his message. "From the onset of the recession, we experienced a net loss of over 200 golf members, and we had very few prospective members. From week to week, our Director of Finance was on edge, hoping we would have enough working capital to pay our staff and our vendors in a timely manner. Our assets were in disrepair and the idea of a large capital campaign seemed out of reach. We developed contingency plans for the eventual loss of more members and the contraction of our operations, even considering the closure of one or more of our golf courses."

By the time The Landings turned 50, however, it was a far different story—and Freund's leading role in the turnaround was worthy of Excellence in Club Management (ECM) recognition.

From "Ravaged" to Revered

The Landings Golf & Athletic Club is nested within the Landings community, which has about 8,500 residents. Slightly more than 7,000 of those residents are now club members, making the club the center of social activities for the community.

Where it once considered closing golf courses, The Landings now has six 18-hole championship courses, several of which have been freshly renovated without member assessments. The club also has a full complement of court sports (tennis, pickleball, bocce and croquet), five pools, ten uniquely branded dining concepts that collectively account for $20 million in annual revenue, and many other popular amenities.

In addition to the specific achievements implemented under Freund's leadership over the past 14 years (see pg. 17), the club's overall profile has changed from "ravaged" to revered, with Freund's drive and vision cited as primary forces behind these key steps in its dramatic transformation:

- Planning and implementing a capital plan for $26.5 million in projects to tear down and rebuild an aging clubhouse, expand an undersized and underequipped Fitness Center, build additional bocce courts, and create a family-oriented pool facility that included the addition of a casual-dining facility that is now one of the club's most popular eateries.
- A turnaround of the club's golf course maintenance practices that included hiring a new Director of Golf Operations and implementing new funding and course-availability practices. The improved conditions elevated The Landings' reputation for top-flight golf, to where it now partners with the PGA to hold an annual Korn Ferry event along with a Q-school qualifier, and also hosts several statewide amateur tournaments.
- Quadrupling annual food-and-beverage revenues in 12 years, going from about $5 million in 2011, with offerings primarily limited to indoor dining at one of four clubhouses and outdoor dining at just one poolside cabana bar, to over $20 million in 2023 with an abundance of choices based not on location, but on style and cuisine. Dining is now available throughout The Landings in atmospheres that range from a white-tablecloth dining room to

casual family settings, venues that offer the feel of a neighborhood bar, and a popular mobile kitchen. Menus now available to diners cover the full sweep of food options, from seafood to steak to sushi, as well as Southern barbecue, Italian, Mexican or simpler fare such as pizza and burgers.

"The enhancement of our club's dining experience has caused members to now look first at their own dining amenities before considering dining in downtown Savannah, an area well-known for outstanding cuisine," noted Bob Hainly, president of the club's board of governors, in nominating Freund for The Brewer Award. "All of these quality dining options come with the benefits of a fully trained culinary and serving staff whose only mission is to please our members with well-prepared meals and excellent service."

By-the-Numbers Success

That mission permeates all aspects of how Freund has assembled and motivated a staff at The Landings with a singular focus on member service throughout all aspects of the club's operation. It is fully articulated in the mission statement that was crafted for a recently updated five-year strategic plan for the club and that Hainly described in his ECM nomination as "Steven's every-day guiding light":

"To create a fulfilling club experience woven into the fabric of our members' recreational and social lives is our highest mission.

"We deliver abundant golf, athletic, social amenities and programming to enrich life, instill well-being and encourage connection.

"Competent, genuinely caring service and meaningful relationships make our club indispensable in our members' lives."

Hainly's nomination credited Freund with helping to "scope and guide our strategic vision and goals since instituting a more robust and focused strategic-planning process in his early tenure at the club." The current strategic plan developed through that process is built on five foundational pillars—financial sustainability, effective leadership, member engagement, operational excellence and capital planning.

To fortify how he and his team provide ongoing support of those pillars, Freund frequently employs other "by the numbers" management techniques, ranging from nine steps of being "Member Ready" to the three key interactions of the service process (greet, give and thank), and even how The Landings' approach to member service can help to fulfill the psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of human needs (physiological, safety, security and belonging, esteem and self-actualization).

"Steven's philosophy is that employee experience drives the member experience," Hainly wrote in his ECM nomination. "He believes in an inverted organizational pyramid with our members at the top. Everything he does is to ensure 'future proofing' of the club and create sustainable success for future generations to come. He makes it a point to have an open-door policy and know every one of our over 500 employees by name. He strives to create an environment that is enriching and enjoyable for staff, teaching through storytelling and his vast knowledge and experience."

Becoming Indispensable

While The Landings had much to celebrate as it marked its 50th anniversary in 2024, including the award bestowed on its Executive Director, Steven Freund made it clear in his message to members that it was not time to rest on either the club's success or his personal laurels. "As we look to our future, we are in a position of strength," he wrote. "Our operations have improved and member patronage and support are greater than ever.

"However," he added, "society doesn't stand still, and the lack of glaring deficiencies can easily morph into a liability. In the coming years, our membership will have an opportunity to make their club better, more relevant and indispensable in their lives. The wisdom of the crowd, along with attention to broader societal expectations, will lay the groundwork for the next 50 years and next generation of LGAC members."

Achieving "indispensability," Freund acknowledged, "is a lofty objective, but one I believe is within our reach. I have conviction that our best days are before us; we have an opportunity to build on our history and move closer to our vision to be the most desirable residential, golf, athletic and social club in the Southeastern United States."

While leading a visitor on a tour of The Landings property that was conducted while the LGAC staff was marshalling a speedy response to clean up extensive tree damage from the winds of Hurricane Helene, Freund described the new challenges that he foresees while seeking to sustain and build on what the club has achieved.

"With our growth, we have to think differently," he said. "With what dining has become here, for example, we really have to operate now like a regional restaurant group. It's not just 'build it and they will come'—we need to have different brand strategies for each concept that involve different degrees of formality, and different fundamentals for the blocking and tackling systems that will dictate the desired results.

"For everything we're doing, the challenge now is, how do we shrink the club to maintain the right connections, for both members and the staff?" Freund added. "We have to be able to keep delivering emotional paychecks for everyone, no matter how big we may get. That will always be the key to success, because in the end the financial results will always just be a reflection of how members are using the club and if we're delivering what they want." ■

Ideas & Achievements

Implemented at The Landings Golf & Athletic Club under Steven Freund's Leadership

■ Club added slightly more than 500 new memberships from 2021 through 2023, with the highest number of Golf members joining since before 2007. Total membership is at a record level of over 3,400 and includes nearly 1,000 dependents under the age of 18.

■ $1.5 million, 3,000-sq.-ft. state-of-the-art Golf Performance Center opened in October 2022 with three hitting bays, three practice bays, demo inventory with advanced fitting technology, an outdoor veranda for pre- and post-session socialization, office space, a showroom and restrooms.

■ "5-9ATE" mobile kitchen (branded for the 598 area code that is exclusive to The Landings community) was established in late 2022 and has steadily gained popularity among the membership as a favored choice for outdoor dining. It features a rotating themed menu that is changed every month, ample outdoor seating with heat lamps and firepits, and yard games, all within a beautiful view of the club's Marshwood golf course.

■ Poolside Cabana Bar features two concepts in one space—during the day, poolside bites are available for members at the bar or available to take out to the pool deck. At 5:00 p.m., the Cabana Bar become the Piscina Cantina, a concept featuring Mexican cuisine.

■ Growth of non-golf social amenities has seen 700 members playing pickleball, with plans to expand to 22 courts; 800 members playing bocce, and tennis facility upgrades and hosting of the Savannah Challenger, a USTA/ATP tennis tournament.

■ Created new positions for Manager of Membership Experiences and Youth & Senior Programming Manager that helped to sharpen focus on creating and improving club events. The budget for events swelled from under $100,000 to $500,000 from the added demand created, and The Landings' New Year's Eve Myriad Ball has now become one of the largest new-year celebrations of any private club in the country, with over 1,300 attendees and different themes, experiences and locations on the property each year.

■ WELL ("What Excellence Looks Like") program of training and guidance delivers standards to all employees, new and existing, through an orientation that assures all members are served in a uniform manner and under the same expectations.

■ Created The Compass, expressing the club's mission, values, member-ready basics and service process and serving as its cultural foundation.

■ A Key Performance Indicator transfers an annually established level of operating profit to a capital fund that is dedicated to meeting all current and future maintenance of assets without the need of a member assessment.

■ In addition to daily communications about activities and special offerings that receive 55-60% open rates, regular opportunities for interaction with members that provide opportunities for input and one-on-one question-and-answer exchanges include monthly open-review sessions of presentations to the board, a member forum on the club website and town hall meetings.

■ Programs for celebrating employee performance and appreciation include 25-year membership dinner, employee decades club, annual employee celebration of excellence and employee anniversary cards signed by every department director.