DON EMERY – THE JAMES H. BREWER AWARD

All Systems "GO"

The branding theme built around Grey Oaks Country Club's initials also reflects the renewed momentum generated by "The Emery Effect."

As an interview begins for his profile as the 2025 recipient of The James Brewer Award through the Excellence in Club Management® (ECM) Awards (see "Honored by Their Peers," opposite page), Don Emery, CCM, CCE, general manager and chief operating officer of Grey Oaks Country Club in Naples, Fla., reiterates that the article should reflect how the recognition is really for the efforts of his entire team, and that several of his department heads should also be interviewed. He then suggests a theme for those additional discussions: "How much of a pain I am to work for."

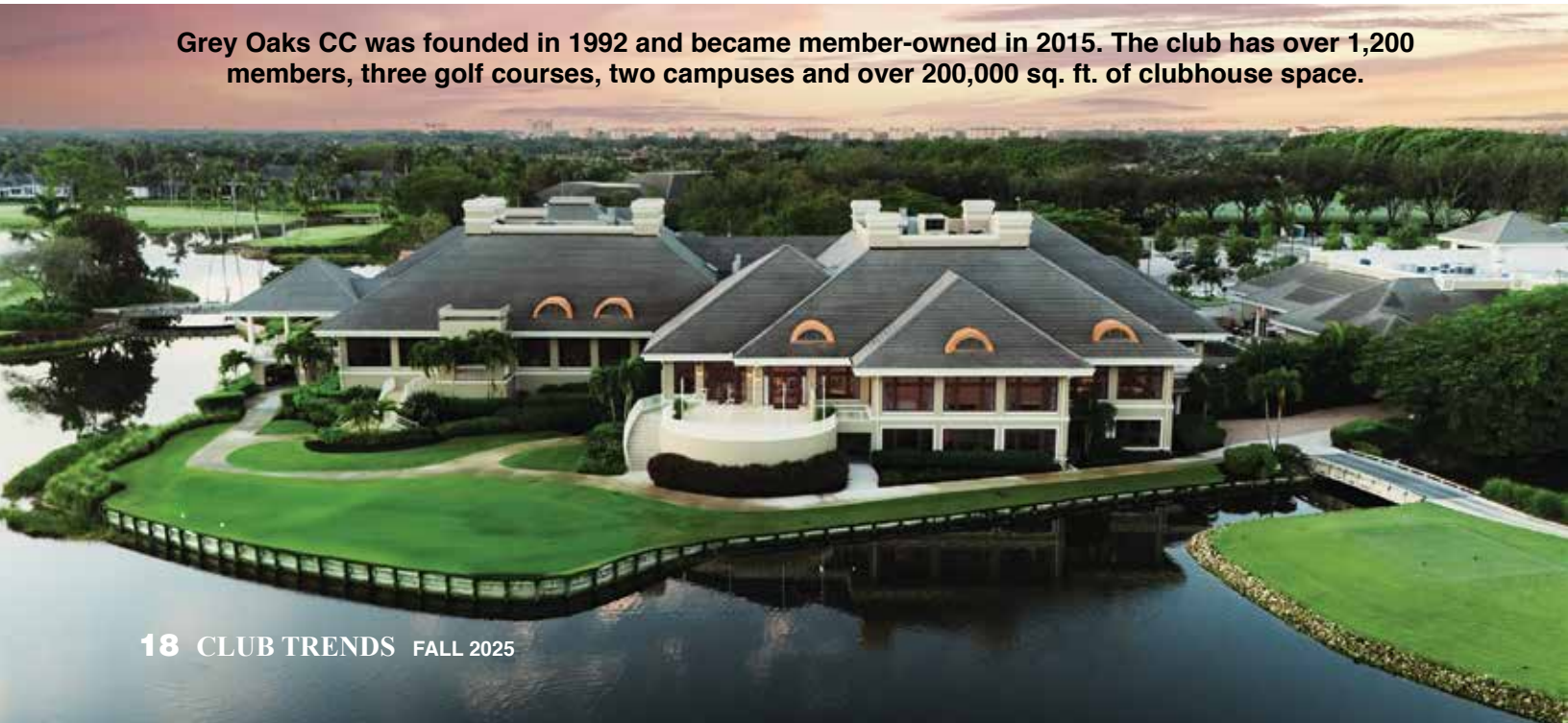
While Emery has a hint of a smile when making the suggestion, he readily acknowledges that what he's asked of his team since coming to Grey Oaks at the end of 2021 has often "pushed people beyond their comfort zones." He adds, however, that he only did so after first restructuring the club's management staff to surround himself with people who shared his passion and drive.

"High performers want to get pushed and keep learning," he says. "I needed people who have the potential to do great things and share the same excitement about finding ways to get better every day. It was only after they were all in place that things began to click."

"The Emery Effect"

Highlights of Accomplishments at Grey Oaks Country Club Under Don Emery's Leadership

- Memberships are now at full capacity
- Golf waiting list increased by 113%, to currently over 100
- $56 million overall invested into Grey Oaks and member stockholders' equity raised 50%. "GO Forward 2026," club's first-ever 5-year capital plan initiative, passed a membership vote with a participation rate of 83.46% to invest $17.4 million in renovation of Pine golf course ($15 million), enhancement of short-game practice area, expansion of racquets facility, expansion of racquets facility, and addition of employee parking lot
- Usage in all areas increased, including 28% rise in food-and-beverage revenue since 2019
- Overall member satisfaction at 95%, with 99% of new members satisfied with the club
- Secured permanent workforce housing for over 100 seasonal and part-time team members
- Transitioned board of directors to move away from managing day-to-day club operations
- New strategic plan developed to start looking beyond 2026 and provide a roadmap for the club



Grey Oaks CC was founded in 1992 and became member-owned in 2015. The club has over 1,200 members, three golf courses, two campuses and over 200,000 sq. ft. of clubhouse space.

Restoring the Luster

That clicking has led to the remarkably rapid revitalization of Grey Oaks, which was founded in 1992 by Judy Sproul, founder of Halstatt, an investment firm that traces its roots to Barron Gift Collier, Sr., the early 20th-century advertising executive who was a pioneering force in Florida's commercial development. Sproul had the vision to use a gift of land received in trust from her father, Barron Gift Collier, Jr., to turn scrubby tomato and strawberry fields into a luxury golf community.

Grey Oaks quickly became known as one of Southwest Florida's premier clubs, and its conversion to member ownership was completed in 2015. Its status continued to elevate under the leadership of Dr. James Butler, CCM, CCE, who served as its general manager for 17 years. After Butler left in 2017 to become CEO of Club Benchmarking, however, Grey Oaks experienced a difficult transition period that was intensified by the onset of the pandemic.

At the end of 2020, Grey Oaks "was at a crossroads regarding its financial standing after a couple of tough years," wrote Rick Fernandes, a past board chair of the club, in his nomination of Don Emery for Brewer Award honors. "We [began] a search for a new general manager [and] the kind of leader we needed to re-spark our club, especially during an uncertain time with the pandemic still looming large." (Hurricane Ian would add to the challenge in 2022.)

"Being a general manager at a large, high-end country club with over 1,200 memberships, three championship golf courses, two campuses and over 200,000 square feet of clubhouse space is no easy feat,"

Honored by Their Peers

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 the National Club Association since 2018.

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.

Awards in these 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 John Furlong Award**, for excellence in management of a club property in Canada
- **The "Rising Star" Award** for an assistant club manager

Lifetime Achievement Awards for a retiring club manager are also included as part of some years' ECM honors.

A Selection Committee comprised of a peer group of leading club managers conducts the judging for the ECM Awards. A full listing of the judges, in addition to information on past winners and on how to nominate candidates for the 2026 awards, can be found at *clubmanageraward.com*.

The 2025 recipients of ECM Awards were honored at a special ceremony and dinner, sponsored by KOPPLIN KUEBLER & WALLACE, that was held during the National Club Conference at The University Club of New York in February 2025. Individual presentations were also made throughout the year at the winners' clubs.

In addition to the profiles of 2025 honorees that appear in this issue, profiles of Robert St. Francis, Jr., CCM, CCE, ECM, of the Sulgrave Club (2025 winner of The Mel Rex Award) and John Dorman, CCM, ECM, of The University Club of New York (2025 Lifetime Achievement honoree) appeared in the Summer 2025 issue of *Club Trends*.

The 2026 ECM winners will be honored during the National Club Conference that will be held April 19-21, 2026 at the Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo, Fla.

Ideas & Achievements

Implemented at Grey Oaks Country Club Under Don Emery's Direction

Food & Beverage/Events

- New focus on member-centric events, vs. outside banquets, has led to higher attendance and spending for creative, world-class member events and near elimination of outside, non-member sponsored events on the property. Banquet dining covers increased nearly 25% and revenues increased 165% from FY '21 to FY '24.

- Formal dining has been given new life through the premier fine-dining experience provided in the Estuary Clubhouse from Wednesday through Saturday in the busy season, as well as an upscale burger night on Mondays. Fully booked evenings and what is described as a "cult-like following from the classic membership who crave the 5-star service experience" led to 57% growth in covers and 125% growth in revenues from FY '21 to FY '24.
- Grey Oaks' Certified Master Chef, Derin Moore, unveiled "GO Fresh," "GO Bold" and "GO Sweet" categories (using a new branding image based on Grey Oaks' initials) to feature exclusive house-made items grown and created on property, including artisan chocolates, pastries, confections and Grey Oaks Honey (cultivated from 12 on-site beehives). Grey Oaks Coffee was also introduced through a partnership with a Florida coffee roaster.

Human Resources

- Traditional human resources department rebranded as People Operations and is now led by managers with backgrounds in training and operations with the Ritz-Carlton organization. Career development plans are created for teammates who express an interest in growing their careers, and a new onboarding program gives new managers the opportunity to sit with department leaders in all areas within their first 45 days. The club's internship program has also been rebuilt to offer similar opportunities for mentorship and career development.
- "GO Lead" program develops future leaders.

Fernandes added. But when he came to Grey Oaks at the end of 2021, Emery brought a wealth of comparable experience from distinguished clubs including Bay Hill Club & Lodge, The Riviera Country Club and Royal Palm Yacht & Country Club, along with other aspects of his background that made him especially well-prepared to handle all that the property presented.

A Man, A Plan, A Process

Emery cites three "Ts" that he learned from the example set by his parents as instrumental in shaping his approach to his own personal and professional life, as well as his management style:

- Your **Time**—The 24 hours in a day is a gift that everyone received equally; how you use it is up to you. (Learned from his parents' devotion to volunteer work.)
- Your **Talent**—While one's natural abilities and skills are partly inherited, they can always be developed further over the years. (Learned from the organization and attention to detail his parents exhibited in their successful professional careers.)
- Your **Treasure**—What you do with your material possessions and all that you have is your decision. (Learned from the emphasis the family placed on philanthropy and providing financial support to a variety of causes.)

Over time, Emery adds, the value of two other "Ts" was also imparted to him: **Ties** (making the most of personal and professional networks) and **Testimony** (sharing success stories with others).

Emery first began to apply those lessons to his own professional development when busing tables and shining shoes as a teenager at Huntington Country Club on his native Long Island. He honed them further at Cornell University's School of Hospitality Management and then continued to draw on them as his career in club management began.

A foundation of his management style—and of the many ways "The Emery Effect" (see pg. 18) has brought renewed momentum to Grey Oaks—has been to always devise and follow "a plan and a process." Adhering to that approach has been the key to the successful initiatives implemented at Grey Oaks (see "Ideas and Achievements" sidebars) as well as broader objectives such as the "GO Forward" capital campaign ("GO" branding, inspired by the club's initials, is now being applied in many forms).

Good Feelings

In interviews with other Grey Oaks team members, there are no references to "pain," only enthusiastic endorsements of the value gained from working with Don Emery.

While it's not known if she's ever seen him wear a

cape or do a full split on stage, Mira Hale Crigler, the club's director of communications and marketing, compares Emery to James Brown. "He's the 'hardest-working man' in the club industry," she says. "He never hesitates to get down in the trenches with everyone, and when you see that, you're eager to be part of working with him to find more ways to provide great experiences for the members."

David Benjamin, MBA, CHTP, Grey Oaks' director of information technology, notes that in addition to the motivation he inspires for the tasks at hand, Emery also prioritizes looking beyond his team's current roles and taking genuine interest in their own career development.

"His desired legacy is to help grow the next group of club leaders," says Benjamin, who was a golf professional prior to coming to Grey Oaks. "After obtaining my MBA, I was looking to take my career in a new direction. I had always thought about going down the GM path but I didn't think anyone would help show me the way. [Emery] believed in me and started mentoring me for how I could start achieving that next step. He created a custom education plan to help me gain insights on where I could learn and from what I could benefit the most."

The "plan and process" for optimizing team performance at Grey Oaks has been built around six strategic steps—talent acquisition, training and development, compensation, retention, culture and compliance—and an emphasis on five key personality traits: knowledgeable, honest, motivated, dependable and collaborative.

"Our record-low turnover rate of under 4% during peak season is a testament to the positive workplace culture [Emery] has cultivated," says Alexandra Shrögendorfer, the club's director of people operations. "Staff morale and engagement have reached unprecedented levels, contributing to a vibrant and supportive work environment that benefits both employees and members. Under his guidance, Grey Oaks' reputation has soared, earning industry-wide accolades that reflect the excellence of our club and team."

Full Speed Ahead

Grey Oaks' rapid revival has also been reflected by its steady reascension as a Platinum Club of America—during the last award cycle, it received the second-largest increase in the rankings. Grey Oaks also recently obtained the Distinguished Club with Elite Status designation. And while financial stability has also been achieved, with Fernandes noting that Emery has "met or exceeded our annual budget every year he has been at Grey Oaks, even in a year when activity was severely impacted by a hurricane," the

Ideas & Achievements

Implemented at Grey Oaks Country Club Under Don Emery's Direction

Golf/Recreation

■ At its East Driving Range, Grey Oaks became the second country club in the U.S. to install Inrange® radar golf-ball tracking technology that geolocates the exact position of balls hit by members throughout their flight, instantly relaying data to in-bay touchscreen or iOS/Android devices. Additionally, an entertainment-focused experience with the Inrange+™ multiplayer gaming and virtual-course offering, along with an outdoor pergola space with food-and-beverage service, was added to the club's suite of member amenities at its performance center. In late 2023, the new GO PLAY pavilion was completed to take the Inrange technology into a pavilion that can host up to 16 players; it has become a hot spot for parties and member-sponsored events that combine virtual golf with food-and-beverage banquet offerings.

Membership

■ Introduced a new "Masters" membership category in 2024 that provides Full Golf members with tenure of 20 or more years with an opportunity to reduce their annual dues and still maintain limited golf access during in-season months. The board authorized selling 20 Masters memberships in the first year, and all 20 spots were filled, making it possible to promote 20 others from the waiting list to Full Golf memberships.

Technology

■ Club secured Qlik analytics program that loads raw data from management software and produces graphs and charts for each department's revenues and performance, along with helpful insights on membership demographics and spending habits.

■ "Tech 101" member classes held by the club's director of information technology, David Benjamin, MBA, CHTP, promote best practices for using Grey Oaks' member website, mobile app and other applications. Strong attendance led to "Tech 201," a broader class for those wanting to be informed on the latest technology trends.

■ To provide full transparency on club spending, the Grey Oaks website includes a governance section that allows members to see quarterly reports, in addition to responses to FAQs.

The positive workforce culture enjoyed by Don Emery (in referee shirt at far left) and his Grey Oaks "GO" team has led to record-low turnover of 4% during peak season (and no technical fouls).

most impactful opportunities for advancement may still lie ahead, with Emery now steering the club to also focus on longer-range strategic issues.

"Having the foresight to direct a new comprehensive strategic plan is an important objective for Don," noted Jim Butler when he submitted support for Emery's Brewer Award nomination. "This is so vital for clubs, especially for those on the scale of Grey Oaks. It is easy to get lost in the weeds of daily operations, but having a clear direction will help guide Grey Oaks for the foreseeable future."

To Emery, it's a matter of recognizing and responding to the importance of putting "energy and innovation into continuous capital planning."

"Great clubs continually invest, and we're blessed to have a membership with a willingness to do so," he says. "A place like this where it's busy constantly, even on 'slow nights,' can be a monster if you let it be one. You can always be on the edge of having fabulous success or, if you lose focus, going off the tracks. And that's what makes it fun—and to our staff's credit, we're keeping it on the tracks." ■

Ideas & Achievements

Implemented at Grey Oaks Country Club Under Don Emery's Direction

Staff Development

- **Leadership Retreats**
  Grey Oaks holds two retreats annually to benchmark best practices and enhance teamwork and collaboration. Each retreat features renowned keynote speakers who educate and motivate team members on current leadership trends.
- **Skip-Level Interviews with Mid-Managers**
  These interviews, conducted by Emery with mid-level managers, are designed to gather insights, understand growth needs, and identify areas for improvement.
- **Development Plans for Potential Future Club Leaders/Succession Planning**
  The club has structured plans to ensure organizational continuity by growing high-potential internal talent for future leadership roles. Components of the program include education, leadership coaching, and mentoring.

Governance

- Created ad hoc committee with member experts in the real estate industry to help solidify the purchase of Bellavista, the 48-unit, 107-bed apartment complex acquired to address the housing needs of both seasonal and year-round employees and enhance Grey Oaks' positioning as an employer of choice in the Naples area's competitive hospitality market. The completion of the housing project not only improved staff living conditions but also fostered a sense of community and belonging among team members.

Philanthropy

- Grey Oaks Cares was created by the club's Philanthropy Committee to raise funds for supporting local charities, leading to an inaugural golf event and auction in January 2025. The event quickly sold out and raised over $740,000 for non-profit organizations in the area. The entire event was underwritten by a small group of members to ensure donation of 100% of all funds raised. Plans are now underway to continue to expand the event each year.
- The Emery Family Fund at the Club Foundation was established in 2025 to honor the parents of Don Emery, Jean and Howard Emery, and their values of service and philanthropy. The fund supports The Club Foundation's mission and industry growth (for more details, visit *clubfoundation.org/fund-emery.html*).