By-the-Book Success

Joe Murphy's development of a comprehensive "Standards of Excellence" document was a key first step for directing the revival of The National Golf Club of Canada.

Over the years, all ECM honorees have contributed, figuratively, to a compilation of what "excellence in club management" has come to mean. But with the addition of Joseph F. Murphy, general manager of The National Golf Club of Canada in Woodbridge, Ont., and the 2025 John Furlong Award winner, the ranks of Excellence in Club Management® recipients now also include someone who has literally written the book on the topic.

In 2022, Murphy was hired by "The National" to help turn around a club that Stephen Miller, past chair of the board, described in his nomination of Murphy for Furlong recognition as "struggling" and with "members [who] were unhappy." One of the first steps Murphy took to get things pointed in the right direction was to craft a comprehensive "Standards of Excellence" document that is now viewed, his nomination noted, as the club's "service Bible."

Ideas & Achievements

Implemented at The National Golf Club of Canada Under Joe Murphy's Leadership

Tournaments and Events

- Launched The National Golf Club Foundation to help solidify interest and support for the club's Ben Kern Pro-Am, which previously struggled to break even. The pro-am was expanded to two days and prominent golf pros were invited to participate. In 2024, the tournament raised over $1 million for the first time, with proceeds going toward funding prostate cancer research at two major Toronto hospitals.
- Elevated the appeal of the National Amateur that is held at the club as a one-day invitational and expended it to include a Senior Amateur Division; there is now a waitlist of those hoping to be invited to participate.
- Coordinated planning for The National's 50th Anniversary Gala reception and dinner in 2024 as well as other anniversary events throughout the year. The 50th anniversary was also commemorated through a multi-year storytelling campaign that included "The 50th Anniversary Chronicles," a nine-part editorial series developed in collaboration with respected golf journalists, and a 250-page, hardcover 50th Anniversary book with archival photographs, a hole-by-hole golf course walkthrough, complete list of club champions and a curated club history.

Facilities

- Directed a comprehensive transformation of the clubhouse's Founders Room to create a permanent legacy display and central space for celebrating the club's heritage and reflecting on its pride. Key features of the room's renovation include museum-grade memorabilia, digitized archives in leather-bound volumes, and a media lounge with a comfortable viewing area for vintage tournament footage that offers members and guests an immersive historical experience.

Food & Beverage

- Increased food-and-beverage patronage by members and their families by over 60% and sales by 70% within one year. Introduced a Food and Beverage Subsidy Program, embedded within the dues structure, that delivered meaningful reductions in menu pricing, with premium entrees and other high-quality items reduced by up to 30%.
- Led a comprehensive revamping of the club's wine list that was carefully curated to reflect member preferences and feature both local and international labels. To enhance value without compromising margins, a new pricing strategy offered bottles costing $50 (Can.) or more at $50 over cost. This transparent and member-focused approach maintained profitability while significantly improving perceived value and wine sales.
- Complimentary barbecued food items are now served once per week on the 6th tee, and a high-caliber Wednesday-evening barbecue has become a weekly tradition and major highlight of the club's outdoor-dining program, with almost every member who plays golf on Wednesday now staying for the event.

Murphy saw the development of the foundational guide as a key component of making a commitment to elevate the service culture throughout The National, which has been recognized since its founding in 1974 as providing one of Canada's premier "pure golf" experiences. In 31 pages, "Standards of Excellence" now outlines the core principles, behavioral expectations and service philosophies that define the club's full member experience. "It serves as both a training tool and an operational compass, to ensure that every team member—regardless of role or department—understands what excellence looks like and how to deliver it consistently," Murphy's nomination described.

The document begins by reiterating The National's mission and vision statements, and then provides clear, actionable examples from each of the club's operating areas for how to anticipate needs, personalize interactions, maintain discretion and uphold attention to detail. Collectively, its chapters reinforce a shared language and unified standard across the entire club.

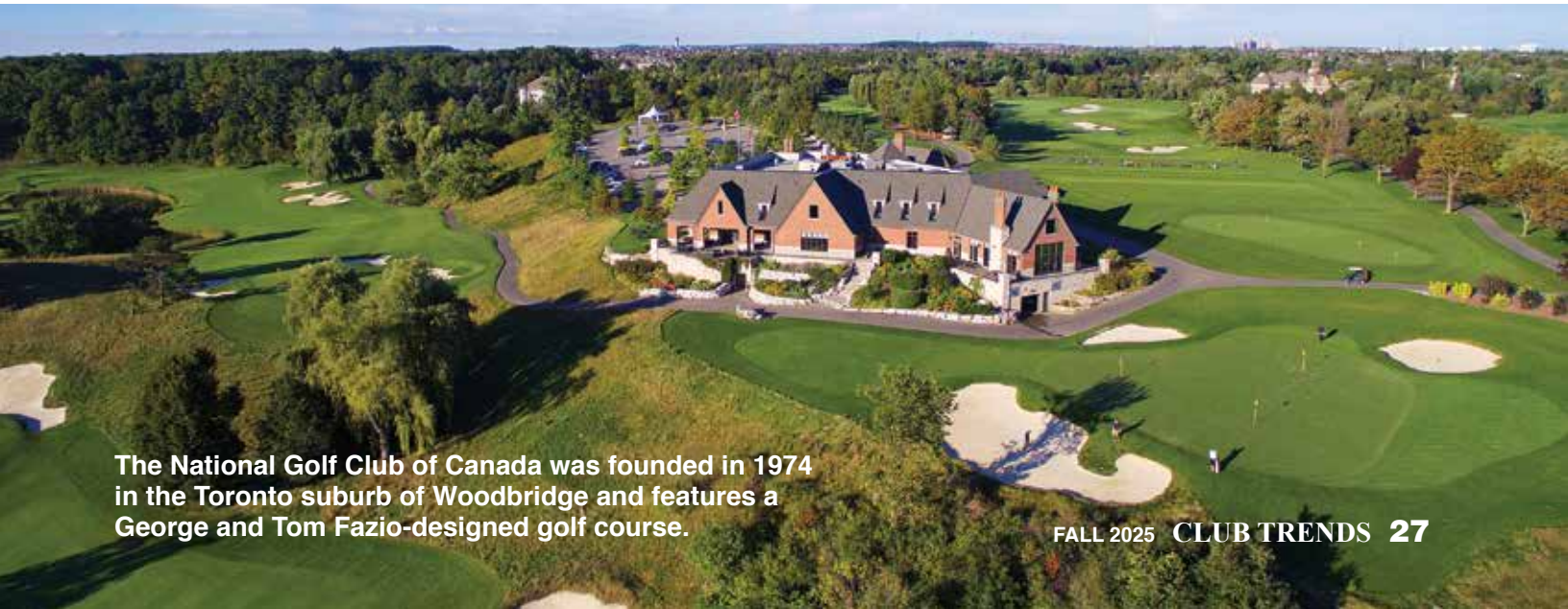
Most importantly, "Standards of Excellence" makes it clear that what's in the document should only be seen as the starting point. "The following standards are to be considered minimum standards for performance and operation of the club," it notes. "As individuals and as a team, we should always strive to be leaders in our industry by going beyond what is the minimum. By adhering to these standards as guidelines, our members will benefit from our consistently high level of quality in service, product, appearance and attitude."

Schooled at an Early Age

Joe Murphy's immersion in clubs, and his understanding of what makes them run successfully, began with his earliest pre-teen experiences as a pull-cart caddie on a golf course in his native Hamilton, Ont. area. "I had pretty much figured out what members liked, and didn't like, by the time I was 12," he jokes.

After Murphy began his professional club management career, his path took him through a variety of roles and leadership positions at several of Canada's most prestigious clubs in both the Hamilton and greater Toronto areas. His experience with situations he encountered along the way eventually attracted him to the opportunity at The National. "I've always really enjoyed the challenge of helping to resurrect older clubs when they start to have operational problems and to bring them back to what's made them great," he says.

While The National, as Canada's sole club with an all-male membership and with its heavy golf focus, might have seemed to present an especially challenging situation, Murphy still saw the potential for effecting positive change through the same fundamental approaches he had successfully employed at previous clubs. "I've managed clubs that have been corporately owned, that have been on the verge of bankruptcy, and that have been looking to



The National Golf Club of Canada was founded in 1974 in the Toronto suburb of Woodbridge and features a George and Tom Fazio-designed golf course.

Ideas & Achievements

Implemented at The National Golf Club of Canada Under Joe Murphy's Leadership

Membership

■ Age criteria for Junior and Intermediate Programs was updated to better align with developmental stages, and access was expanded for legacy Junior and Intermediate members by raising program capacity. Pre-Junior members (ages 7-12) are now permitted access to practice facilities, fostering earlier engagement with the game of golf and the club environment.

Governance

■ Previously, the board of The National functioned in a highly operational manner, and all committees were comprised solely of board members. Realizing the limitations of this structure, the formation of a dedicated Governance and Nominating Committee was recommended. This led to a complete overhaul of all committees to align them with best practices in board governance, and the introduction of a skills matrix that provides a comprehensive overview of board competencies and identifies key gaps in expertise required for the club's future success. This matrix now informs recruitment and succession planning at the board level. Additionally, committees now include non-director members, broadening the club's talent base and increasing member engagement. The new model has also strengthened the pipeline for future board leadership, with prospective directors now identified from among active committee members.

Staff Development

■ Each team member fills out a "My Service Commitment" card to commit to one or two concrete, actionable behaviors they will focus on throughout the season, either on their own or collaboratively. The cards are shared or kept as a reminder and followed up by leadership throughout the season. The commitments help to create personal ownership of service excellence and reinforce the idea that each person can be a spark for a "wow" moment.

Communications

■ Full redesign of the club's communications strategy was implemented to transition to more modern, professionally branded e-blasts with a more visually engaging and accessible format. Weekly communications are now divided into four targeted e-blasts for Food & Beverage (every Tuesday), Golf Operations (every Wednesday), Turf Updates (bi-weekly to monthly on Thursdays) and Board/GM Updates (monthly). Member engagement increased significantly following the rollout of new strategy, with open rates rising from 65% to 85%.

expand and rebrand," he says. "While they all have their unique set of circumstances, it's still a matter of adapting and finding the right ways to connect with members and staff, and to have a governance model that makes it clear who will have what roles."

Making the Words Pay Off

As shown in the "Ideas and Achievements" boxes at left and on pg. 26, the operational guidelines and expectations established in the "Standards of Excellence" document after his arrival at The National have led to a variety of significant and impactful accomplishments across all aspects of the club under Murphy's direction. He has also greatly increased the impetus for putting the standards into action by introducing a new performance-bonus structure for all management and supervisory staff that offers the opportunity to earn up to 10% of base salaries.

To replace the often-arbitrary nature and limited motivational value of traditional year-end bonuses, Murphy explains, the new structure sets objectives in three categories—operational, financial and strategic—and gives each objective a weighted value. Measurement metrics are then based on feedback from member satisfaction surveys, financial results in each department, and individuals' contribution to their departments' success.

Combined with greater prioritization of internal programs to reinforce staff appreciation and boost morale, along with technological innovation in the HR space to implement a communication program that enhances engagement with all staff levels and especially frontline employees, a culture of open innovation and mutual respect has been cultivated at The National that has elevated both employee satisfaction and the quality of member service.

"Excellence is not a word taken lightly at The National Golf Club of Canada, and [Joe Murphy] has instilled and achieved a spirit and level of excellence that we could only envision [before he arrived]," Miller wrote in his Furlong nomination. "The changes we've seen are nothing short of remarkable, and the outstanding turnaround at The National lies within his excellent leadership skills.

"Whether it has been toughening up the membership process, strengthening the budgeting process, improving communications, enhancing social events, emphasizing staff training or initiating better governance at the board level, Joe has proven repeatedly that he's the leader we needed when we hired him." ■