## JOEL LIVINGOOD – THE MEAD GRADY AWARD

# Three-Way Vision

The successful mission at Interlachen Country Club has focused on celebrating its past, creating present-day happiness and charting a path to an even better future.

**In April 2025, Joel Livingood**, CCM, general manager and CEO of Interlachen Country Club in Edina, Minn., posted appreciation on LinkedIn for the club's new website and the team members who were instrumental in executing the project. "There aren't many things left on my original list from 2017 [after taking his position at Interlachen], but the website was one of them," Livingood wrote. "Derek Schmidt, Kasey Dormanen and Jeff Keiser did an incredible job capturing the essence of our brand and club."

April 2025 was also when Livingood received The Mead Grady Award through the Excellence in Club Management® (ECM) Awards (see pg. 19), in recognition of how he led his team and club through impressive execution of other items from that list (see "Ideas and Achievements," pgs. 24-25). "The changes have been monumental," said David Oxford, Interlachen's board chair and president, in his remarks during the awards presentation. "We embarked on a $31 million capital plan, we enhanced our facilities and amenities, and the feedback from our membership has been tremendous."

Later in the year, Livingood chuckled when asked if completion of his "original list" meant he and his team could finally catch their collective breath. "The list of what to do isn't any shorter," he said. "We add to it every day."

Pursuing a career in club management was not originally on Joel Livingood's list after graduating with a marketing degree from the University of Minnesota in 2011. But after interviewing for various corporate jobs in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, he remembered how he had always enjoyed working in

**Interlachen Country Club was founded in 1909 and has hosted several major golf tournaments, including the 1930 U.S. Open that was won by Bobby Jones as the third leg of his Grand Slam. For the 100th anniversary of that event, the club will host the U.S. Women's Open in 2030.**

hospitality at Oxbow (N.D.) Country Club, outside his hometown of Fargo, starting in the eighth grade as a range-ball retriever and continuing in the golf shop through high school and college.

When he heard that Oxbow was looking for a general manager, Livingood took a shot and landed the job, at age 22. "I didn't just manage [the club], I did everything, including digging dikes by hand and sandbagging when there was flooding on the property," he recalls. "There was no shortage of hard work."

How Oxbow was being led by such a young GM soon captured local attention. And when *Prairie Business* magazine featured the club in 2013, Livingood provided some early insights into how he was shaping an approach to club management that would eventually lead to his ECM honors.

"I really think the future of private clubs is in families and having something for everybody," he told *Prairie Business*. The club was also benefitting, he added, from the "interesting dynamic" that came from blending the fresh perspectives he and other young managers provided with proper respect for what their older and more experienced colleagues could contribute. At 24 years old and with all of two years' experience, Livingood also showed he wasn't afraid to think big, telling the publication that his strategy for leading Oxbow included following what the most innovative private clubs around the country were doing.

## Defining the Mission

In 2014, Livingood returned to the Minneapolis-St. Paul area to become general manager of North Oaks Golf Club. Through that region's club-management network, he developed a collegial relationship with Interlachen's GM, Eric Dietz, CCM, CCE, PGA (Dietz was already a Mead Grady Award winner himself, earning the honor in 2012 while at Lakewood Country Club in Rockville, Md.). When Dietz left Interlachen for an opportunity in Florida, he encouraged Livingood's successful pursuit of the position.

Despite its "great history and great membership," Livingood says Interlachen was wrestling with an "identity crisis" when he assumed its GM role. "Did we want to be a Top 100 golf club or a family club?" he describes. "There wasn't a commitment to being great at either one, and as a result there had been little to no capital investment for almost a decade."

Livingood felt there didn't need to be a choice—the 116-year-old club could be great at both. The luster of its rich golf legacy, with strong ties to major tournaments and storied names including Donald Ross, Bobby Jones, Patty Berg and Annika Sörenstam, could be restored with a "sympathetic" course restoration, renewed pursuit of premier events (Interlachen is now in line to host the Minnesota State Amateur in 2028 and the U.S. Women's Open in 2030), and enhanced support for the tradition of memorable golf experiences provided by the department led by Director of Golf Nathan Ollhoff, who has held the position since 2009 as only the club's sixth head professional in its history.

Livingood also had many ideas for how new facilities and amenities could bolster the family-club side of the equation, But elevating other areas of the club to match golf's appeal and standards, he felt, would also hinge on first aligning the staff throughout the organization to embrace shared values and pursue a unified mission. He made it a priority in his first year to work with his team to craft easily digestible and retainable definitions that are now displayed prominently throughout the club.

**Mission:** To enrich the lives of our members by providing outstanding championship golf and family experiences.

**Values:**

**Tradition** – We preserve the time-honored traditions that have shaped our community.
**Excellence** – We pursue excellence in all we do.
**Stewardship** – We protect and enhance Interlachen for the next generation.

## Ideas & Achievements

### *Implemented at Interlachen Country Club Under Joel Livingood's Leadership*

### Membership

■ Since 2017, membership has grown from 693 to 879 and the club currently has a waiting list of over 100 families.

### Financial Performance

■ Club has met or exceeded bottom-line change in net-assets budget in each year since 2017 and its operating budget in five of the seven years. Unrestricted net assets have grown from $12.7 million to $35.8 million (a 14% compounded annual growth rate). Total annual revenue has grown from $9 million to $28 million.

### Facilities

■ $67M in capital investments since tenure began in 2017 have included:

—$11 million clubhouse renovation, addition of outdoor dining terrace overlooking golf course, construction of indoor Golf Performance Center, construction of Fitness Center (2018-19)

—$1 million renovation of golf shop and offices (2020)

—$20 million construction of Fieldhouse (two-level fitness complex with café, retail, three fitness studios, locker rooms and youth activity center), Pavilion (indoor racquet sports), The Lodge (casual family restaurant), and new outdoor racquet courts. Renovation of clubhouse team member spaces including offices, conference room and café (2022-23)

—$10 million golf course renovation by Andrew Green and construction of Founders for pre- and post-golf dining (2023-24)

**Innovation** – We adapt to meet the desires of our members today and tomorrow.
**Enjoyment** – We create happiness.
**Community** – The spirit of our members and our team define our community.

"Strategy and planning have to be driven by taking your mission and values beyond just what's on paper and living them out every day; the results will produce the resources," Livingood says. "And to be outstanding and best-in-class in all areas, we had to support our team members with programs that reflect a commitment to investing in them and ensuring they feel equipped for success."

The stage was then set to drive Interlachen's transformation through three core elements:

**Strategic alignment**, through the clarity that now defined what the club was (its mission), what mattered most (its values) and how it would succeed (its priorities and goals).

**Disciplined execution**, to build a purpose-driven, fast-paced culture focused on exceeding the expectations of both the members and the team.

**Effective governance**, through a strong partnership with the board that was grounded in a clear understanding of the distinct roles and responsibilities of management and volunteer leaders.

Another element of effective governance, Livingood notes, has been the "unwavering commitment" of Interlachen's leadership to clear the path for all the changes being planned. Committee and management structures were streamlined to retain Interlachen's agility as its facilities expanded and its membership and activity levels swelled. "As we got bigger, it was important to still function like a small organization that can pivot and to have leaders stay close to the front lines," Livingood notes.

## No Looking Back

At Livingood's ECM Award presentation, David Oxford lauded how Interlachen's member-satisfaction scores "reflect the conscientious effort and focus of Joel and his team" to successfully deliver the mission and values crafted eight years earlier. But no one on the team has any plans to now consider the job done.

"Our culture is one of growth, development and continuous improvement," says Nathan Olhoff. "We now have one holistic standard for all areas—but in all cases, we still want to get incrementally better and think about what will matter the next time a member comes down Interlachen Boulevard."

Executive Chef Aaron Anderson came to Interlachen in 2018. "The leadership here, with its commitment to facilities and both the front and back of the house across the entire campus, felt next-level," Anderson says. "We've shown here that you can respect tradition and still not have to be an old-school, 'grandma's basement' type of place."

To Brian Boll, who became the Club's director of golf course and grounds in 2020, the prevailing attitude can be described as simply, "Interlachen doesn't sleep."

Livingood gives full credit to how all of his team leaders, and those they direct, share his ECM recognition by being equally "stubborn about following the vision" and helping to shift the club's collective thinking "from seeing limitations, and why we can't do something, to seeing what's possible."

"Hospitality is a team sport, and everyone has had an influence in reshaping the experience here," he says. "No one wants to walk past an idea or opportunity." Or not add it to the list. ■

### Food & Beverage

■ From FY 2017 to FY 2025, member dining more than doubled, from $1.7 million to $3.5 million, and banquet sales increased from $1.5 million to $2.5 million.

### Fitness

■ From no fitness offerings in 2019, the club now hosts 5,000 visitors per month in its new Fieldhouse and offers, on average, more than 200 group-fitness classes and 500 private-training sessions per month. Personal-training staff has grown from five initial hires in 2019 to 15 currently, to allow the addition of group fitness, massage therapy, nutrition coaching and physical therapy. Fitness revenue has grown from $0 in 2019 to more than $600,000 in 2024.

### Human Resources/Staff Development

■ Full-time staff has increased from 63 to 107 and total staff, including seasonal and part-time, has grown from 289 to 365.
■ Moments that Matter, a value-based recognition program, highlights team members who embody core values.
■ Partnerships with Rosetta Stone, YogaFit and chiropractic services provide opportunities for language learning, wellness and self-care.

### Communications

■ Developed in-house communications and creative agency that develops all digital creative material, including highly produced video and social-media content and custom deliverables for special events and food-and-beverage presentations.
■ Documented every aspect of golf course restoration and West Campus construction through highly produced digital content that was utilized internally through weekly club communication and externally on social channels.