

BY JOAN WILDER

# Women in Club Management

Private clubs offer challenges

and opportunities for a new breed of

managers

No matter what you do, life never stops changing. Even when it seems that things are standing still, it's only a matter of perspective. Once time passes — a year, a decade or a century — it's easy to see what's changed: The way we dress, the words we use, the way we communicate, the color of the

ink in the *New York Times*.

In the 120-or-so years since the earliest golf clubs began to emerge in the US, we've seen a lot of changes in the club world. From the male-dominated days of the late 19th century when clubs were known as "Eve-less Edens," we've evolved to a point where women

are the fastest growing group of golfers in the nation.

The growth of the number of females teeing-off parallels the growth of female — and family — club participation in all types of clubs. And, while the club world has managed to retain the ceremony and tradition that is its *raison*

d'etre, it has had to continually transform itself to accommodate the evolving lifestyles of its members.

In addition to the growth of women's participation in clubs, among the biggest changes we've tracked in recent times is the increase of female managers.

Based on the premise that the

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fairer sex has much to offer, coupled with the fact that the majority of today's hospitality school graduates are female, we would like to present some insights, advise and wisdom — from and about — women in club management.

"I see quite a bit of growth in terms of female managers in our

local Evergreen Chapter of CMAA [Club Managers of America Association]," said Beth Curtis, general manager of the Bellevue Club in Bellevue, Washington. The fact that there are at least six females in CMAA's Evergreen Chapter speaks for itself.

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Curtis, who has managed the 5,000-member club for 13 years, believes that she faces the same chal-

lenges that any male GM encounters.

"I don't think I've had any more difficult a time being a woman,"

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said Curtis. "The members, and my fellow club managers, have always shown me absolute respect."

While Curtis said that she doesn't personally see any differences between male and female management styles, she has nevertheless observed, "members feel more com-

fortable airing their complaints or something confidential to a women." Members needing to talk would seek Curtis out even when she was the assistant GM at Bellevue.

Curtis stresses the importance of being truly service-oriented for anyone considering a career in club management. She also believes that she, or he, must be able to handle stress well.

"It's a fun job — I love the challenges," said Curtis. "Not everyone would want to be a GM, though, male or female. But, if you love the hospitality industry, you should go for it."

Silja Griffin, GM of the Seattle Tennis Club, believes that the "core character of a general manager is someone who can manage people." Griffin, who applied for her job five years ago while vice-president of membership and marketing at the Washington Athletic Club in Seattle, believes that good management rests largely on a GM's ability to form relationships with members and staff, and to listen.

Griffin believes that women tend to be better relationship builders, which translates into a sense of comfort in a club. Still, she believes that once a woman has reached the level of GM, there is no significant gender difference in management styles.

"To get to this level, you simply have to perform," said Griffin.

Griffin feels fortunate to have many supportive colleagues, and said that she has "found here that there is a new openness for women in the hospitality industry." She enjoys the nature of her job, which requires "a varied skill set that includes everything from fixing boilers, to noticing fine details like dust or that a chair skirt needs pressing."

Griffin believes that behavioral flexibility is important in a good GM as he or she manages a "whole new work force and membership that won't tolerate an autocratic management style."

Being aware of the changing demographics of its membership can help management refocus a club's marketing efforts.

According to Sandy Frappier, CCM, general manager of Fort

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Wayne Country Club in Indiana, the majority of new members at Fort Wayne are families.

"The decision to join a club used to be made by the male," said Frappier "Now, we've found it's a joint decision in families. While the male may be attracted to the golf, if there

aren't family facilities, it's hard for him to justify the cost. Many of these younger people are also beginning to find our gender-specific tee times awkward."

"In families today, women are the decision-makers," said Alexandra Castenskiold, general manager of the Sherwood Country Club in Thousand Oaks, California. "If the woman likes the club, the family will join. She'll tell her girlfriends, too, and they'll join."

Because Castenskiold felt "that women were an untapped market," she has implemented several activities attractive to women. Today, the club offers a monthly lecture series, tours to such places as near-by Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, arts and crafts, and children's activities that the "kids love so the parents love."

Lynn Riggs, general manager of the Glendale Country Club in Bellevue, Washington, believes that the influx of families in clubs is causing male-only activities to lose their appeal.

"Now that lots of clubs have phased out the all-male grill, members are finding that they enjoy the camaraderie of women," said Riggs, who is in her third year as Glendale's GM, after holding that position at two other clubs.

Just as Riggs sees members enjoying a mixed membership, she sees a mix of management styles in both sexes.

"I think the difference in management styles is individual," said Riggs, who believes that listening is vital to good management.

"If you are tuned into what members are saying and really listening, even if you don't do what they want, they will be okay, as long as you address the issue" said Riggs. "I know men who have terrible listening skills, and ones who have good ones."

Riggs thinks that young women interested in club management should study hard so they know what they're talking about and can project confidence.

"You have to have the confidence that you can do whatever you're asked to do," said Riggs, whose work history includes a 30-month stint as a GM in Hong Kong

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beginning in 1989.

"I encourage women to look at overseas clubs, especially in Thailand and China where they're eager to have an American's expertise," said Riggs, whose youngest son graduated from high school the same month she left for Hong Kong.

I didn't feel any prejudice against women in Hong Kong, and I met lots of female managers over there as well as two other GMs — one in Hong Kong and one in Singapore. It was a fabulous experience."

The club in Hong Kong found Riggs through her membership in the National Association of Club Athletic Directors (NACAD), and she advises women seeking club management jobs to join associations and network.

"Get to know managers at conferences, and seek them out," said Riggs, who was hired for the discrete 30-month term at the same time her successor, a native of Hong Kong, was hired to train under her.

Taking Riggs' networking idea to an institutional level, Tarun Kapoor, the director of the professional development Institute at Cal Poly Pomona, would like to see an industry-wide mentoring program for female hospitality students.

"You would need to pair successful female managers with female students and create a mentoring program," said Kapoor. "CMAA would have to be the engine that drives the program, since private clubs are such small businesses."

Kapoor believes that the enormous contribution women can make to club management isn't being fully realized.

"I see a strong movement to convert from the male-dominated environment to a family environment at clubs," said Kapoor. "You can see the trends, it's clearly happening, but statistically it's a blip on the screen."

Kapoor, who also does strategic planning for clubs on a consulting basis, sees the industry need for young female managers as crucial to a club's survival. According to

Kapoor, if a traditional club fails to provide the style and energy of young managers, it won't attract younger members and will die off when its long-time members pass on.

"If you don't start to mix your membership population, you're planning your own obsolescence," said Kapoor.

With the large number of female hospitality graduates and the current labor crunch, Kapoor believes that it's in the best interest of the industry to nurture females.

Jim Singerling, CEO of CMAA, also believes in cultivating the female majority of hospitality students for club management, and thinks that the field is wide open to them.

"In a less than 4 percent labor market," said Singerling, "women can pick and choose where they want to work." Singerling, who was a GM for 17 years, disagrees with Kapoor's assessment of the number of clubs that remain male-dominated.

"I don't believe today's clubs are being run by these stereotyped

boards of decades past," said Singlerling. "To suggest that stereotyped club governance of the past is any part of the majority of club governance structure today just isn't true."

In order to help students connect with clubs, Singlerling said that CMAA has established a summer internship program that has students "coming out running."

According to Alan Stutts, dean of the Conrad Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management at the University of Houston, internship programs, such as CMAA's, are needed to expand student's awareness of club management as a career.

"Eighty to ninety percent of the female freshman here have never even thought about club management," said Stutts, who believes that women have much to contribute to clubs.

Stutts also sees the lack of on-campus recruitment contributing to the lack of awareness.

"Our students are heavily recruited by restaurants and hotels," said Stutts, "but the only club re-

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ruitment we've had is from the Club Corporation of America in Dallas."

According to Stutts, clubs have to find a way to talk to students about the future possibilities available to them in a club.

"These students want to hear about potential career paths open to them," said Stutts.

Young people attending a hospitality school, such as the Conrad Hilton College, have the advantage of exposure to a range of career options. Conrad Hilton requires all first year students to take a beginning level club management course. The college also offers an advanced course in club management that in-

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**roduces students to various working professionals as part of its training protocol. The local, student chapter of CMAA also organizes**

trips to some of the more than 100 clubs in the Houston area.

Stutts believes that women have a distinctive management style that works well in club management.

"Women managers have a style of handling people, especially members, that's different from a man's," said Stutts.

Castenskiold, too, thinks that women have a certain management style that works well in clubs.

"Female managers are much more in tune with employees, and members," said Castenskiold. "Employees need to be heard, they need to be listened to. That's a very female thing. Whereas it's much more of a man's thing that if it's not working, just fix it. But, ultimately, someone who shows they care gets much more out of people."

While Frappier believes the good marriage of a club with a particular GM is very individual, she, too,

thinks that female managers have a style that tends to include empathy, flexibility, and good listening skills. Said Julie Nielsen, CCM, general manager of the Everett Golf and Country Club in Everett, WA: "Women are team players, they share the big picture and they're definitely not autocratic."

Nielsen, who has two children under four-years-old, credits "an understanding husband and a good nanny" with her success managing a thousand-member club, while being a young mother. Nielsen draws the line at fifty-hour work-weeks, and said she only has time for one hobby — her work with the Evergreen chapter of CMAA, of which she was recently voted president.

In her six years as Everett's GM, Nielsen has taken two, three-month maternity leaves. She said that she's managed to do that because she has a supportive Board of Directors and has "created a fabulous management team — my staff."

Frappier, who's in line to be CMAA's first female president in 2001, echoes many of her colleagues' sentiments about their work.

"It's a wonderful opportunity," said Frappier. "You never have any two days alike. I work with wonderful people — staff and members — that can be both the best thing and the most challenging. You have to be people-oriented to be good. It's also more and more important to have business skills, and a tremendous opportunity to stretch your business knowledge. I am truly a generalist, which is very interesting. I get to work on renovations, zoning, financial aspects, big parties, entertainment — we've hosted dignitaries and the Secret Service. You never know what the next day will bring, and clubs are also physically safe and secure environments."

Singerling sums up the evolving pro-female attitude that characterizes this historical era in the club industry.

"Females have now passed the 50 percent point in our CMAA student membership," said Singerling. "They've seen that the compensation and benefit packages in the club industry are higher than in any other segment of the hospitality industry, and they're going for it."