

C&RB CLUB FEATURE

Back on Solid



Ground



New leadership, activities and an exciting new spirit have made **The Club at Mediterra** a player again.

By Joe Barks, Editor

As the weather began to cool last year and the leaves began to turn, they started to make their way to their club in southwest Florida from points throughout the North and other parts of the country and the world. After they'd arrived and greeted those who were already there, including some for whom Florida was already a year-round location, they immersed themselves in all that the club had to offer as it came to life for the winter—golf, tennis, swimming, fitness, dining and many other social activities centered around the warm weather and Gulf of Mexico beachfront.

But for this just-completed season, the migration to The Club at Mediterra in Naples, Fla. involved more than just the usual number of members from out-of-state who were heading south to enjoy their five months in the sun. It also included several accomplished managers from top clubs around the



PHOTO BY LOUIS VEVNE

As the club's first member and its current Board President, Carl Dill had a full perspective on where the club needed to go after it became member-owned. And as an executive coach, he had a keen eye for what kind of leadership would be required to take it there.

Whether they were already at Mediterra or wanted to come there, Tom Wallace had one message for club managers who wanted to join him in Naples: Understand, and demonstrate daily, all that it takes to be part of a winning team.



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The Club at Mediterra AT A GLANCE

- Location: Naples, Fla.
- Opened for play: 2001
- No. of members: Golf, 450; Social, 142; Sports, 101
- Average member age: 56
- Golf Holes/Designer: 36/Tom Fazio
- Annual rounds: 44,000, split evenly between courses
- Chief Executive Officer/General Manager: Tom Wallace
- Director of Clubhouse Operations: Carmen Mauceri
- Director of Golf Operations: Rob Anderson



- Sports Club Director: Tim Bauer
- Director of Golf Course Operations: Scott Whorrall
- Membership Director: Max Passino
- Chief Financial Officer: Keith Hughes
- Support and Development: Rob McWilliams
- Executive Chef: Greg John
- Event Coordinator: Mary Ann Shea
- Facilities Manager: Rob Hirst
- Beach Club Manager: Mike Snyder
- F&B Service Manager: Zak Brzytwa
- Beach Club Assistant: Jordan Kovalcik

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U.S. who had decided to join forces with others already in place on the Mediterra staff. Those redirecting their careers southward were drawn by the opportunity—and challenge—to be part of a new team being formed to write a new chapter in the history of a property that had already experienced incredible highs and lows in its first 10 years of existence.



PHOTO BY LOUIS VEVNE

Director of Golf Rob Anderson and his staff have seen golf rounds, pro shop sales and other parts of the operation show significant gains in the past season—and they can't wait to plan fully for the next one.

Catching the Coach's Eye

As holder of The Club at Mediterra's Member Card No. 1, and the current President of its Board, Carl Dill has had an especially good front-row view—even when he might have really wanted to cover his eyes—of its turbulent first decade. A Chicago native, he is glad he was right in envisioning what the community, and club, could become when he bought his home and became a member while the property was still “dirt and farmland” as it was being developed in 2001 by Bonita Bay Group. He still proudly recalls how Mediterra quickly emerged to become the flagship of Bonita Bay properties, and how the club drew national acclaim as it helped to “differentiate and distinguish” Southwest Florida as one of the most highly desirable areas to live and play.

As for the periods when the real-estate market cratered and Bonita Bay teetered on the brink of bankruptcy, potentially taking Mediterra with it, and then the subsequent scramble to save the club through the members' purchase of it in 2009, Dill points to what has been laid out as Mediterra's “roadmap for the

future,” to show how the club has now moved beyond those stages.

The first stop on that map is member ownership and re-capitalization. As the 2011-2012 season approached, Dill explains, Mediterra had those things in place, and now needed to reach stops number two (governance, mission and vision) and three (new leadership team).

“We didn't want to operate the club; we wanted to be member-owned, but not member-run,” Dill says. “And it's typical to relieve the developer's management staff from duty when a club becomes member-owned—so we also had to change our approach for who would direct the operations as we, the members, got less involved with them.”

Mediterra adopted the CEO model of governance, with its committees transitioning to advisory roles for the club's professional managers. Formal language was also drawn up to restate the club's mission (“Be the leader among Southwest Florida community lifestyle private clubs, providing a distinguished experience for our members and guests”) and vision (“community excellence,” as a shared goal with the community association).

But there was also a more immediate mission that, while not put on paper, could be expressed in simpler terms: Make some noise that will be heard well beyond Naples, to let everyone know that Mediterra is a player again.

Big-Bang Theory

As Dill saw it, the biggest bang that could be sounded for that purpose—and that would also help form the new leadership team needed for step three most immediately and effectively—would come from bringing in a highly qualified name to fill the new CEO position. That led to an announcement at the end of last summer that reverberated throughout club management circles:

Tom Wallace, who had earned acclaim for guiding the storied Oakmont (Pa.) Country Club through major course and clubhouse renovations as well as many USGA Championships, would be Mediterra's new CEO/GM.

"Getting Tom Wallace matched our hype," says Dill. "He has an incredible reputation nationally. I do some work as an executive coach, and he's one of the most naturally gifted leaders I've ever seen. Hiring him set the tone, not only for what we needed to do in club management, but also for attracting new memberships and getting real estate prospects to see us as the place to go in southwest Florida."

For his part, Wallace was certainly torn

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A new tennis stadium venue (above) and popular new bocce courts (left) have demonstrated Mediterra's commitment to improving facilities and enhancing the club's amenities—and have also helped Tim Bauer (above) move closer to his goals for a distinctive and well-rounded Sports Club operation (center left).



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Max Passino, who came to Mediterra as Membership Director in 2008, now has a waiting list to manage.

New Director of Clubhouse Operations Carmen Mauceri, who came from Chagrin Valley CC and has also been a club executive chef, immediately implemented new standards and training measures such as at-a-glance graphics for specials and entrees, as shown above right (for an overview of all techniques used, see the online version of this article at www.clubandresortbusiness.com).



about all that he would have to leave behind at Oakmont—but in the end, he simply couldn't resist the new challenge that Mediterra presented. The timing of when he got to Naples, though—at the start of September and the official kickoff to the club's season—gave those challenges levels of urgency that far surpassed anything he'd encountered previously in his career.

"I am not a turnaround king—I'm a team builder," Wallace explains. "In my other positions, I had a two- to three-year window to build a team and establish a culture of excellence. But within 48 hours of arriving [at Mediterra], I had to solidify the staff for the coming season, while also planning for long-term goals. Plus, this was in a situation where members were understandably eager to see immediate results.

"We needed to assess the current team and then make changes that were needed," he says. "I gave everyone a fair understanding of where we were going, how we were going to get there, and when we needed to get there. Everyone who was already here was given a chance to get on board—and many stepped up dramatically. But I also had to be prepared to make changes where it was clear our vision was not shared."

As the assessment period unfolded, the migration pattern of management talent to southwest Florida began to fill up the map, with the routes from the Pittsburgh and Cleveland

areas (where Wallace grew up and started his career, with The Country Club) showing especially heavy traffic.

In fairness to Wallace (and as a testament to his leadership abilities and reputation), many of those who followed him to Naples did so on their own, telling him as soon they heard he was making the switch that they wanted to be considered for any possible opportunities. "It was a chance to make history," says Rob McWilliams, who came from Oakmont to manage Mediterra's Support and Development function and lead much-needed IT upgrades, in a comment echoed by others.

Several key new managers also came who did not have any prior connection to Wallace, such as Director of Golf Rob Anderson, formerly with Belfair Plantation in South Carolina. Being able to attract such new talent confirmed Dill's expectations for one of the major benefits of attracting Wallace to the job. "It's had a huge impact on positioning ourselves to recruit great staff and attract management of top caliber," Dill says.

Wallace and those who joined the Mediterra team for the new season also benefitted from the invaluable, experience-based insights provided by managers who had been at the club through previous seasons, including Membership Director Manon "Max" Passino (2008); Sports Club Director Tim Bauer (2009); Director of Golf Course Operations Scott Whorrall (a Mediterra "original" who supervised the grow-in of both



PHOTO COURTESY THE CLUB AT MEDITERRA

After a full-out season, the new Mediterra team won't take a knee for too long—excitement abounds over what can be accomplished after a full summer of planning and preparation.

courses), and many others.

Trying to meld such a varied mix of new and existing managers and staff so quickly only added to the challenges at hand. But with the results for the season now pretty much in, there's plenty of evidence that the new Mediterra team came together quite well to help the club not only survive, but thrive.

"It's been an amazing year," Dill told the membership at March's annual meeting. "We've had significant membership growth, with over 50 new golf members, and have reached our cap for golf memberships two to three years ahead of plan. Member participation is at record levels, with over 500 participants in our new bocce program, and our new 'Megaterra' all-community event selling out in six hours. Golf rounds have had record numbers, and real estate sales are also increasing.

"I don't believe any of this happened by accident, just because we became member-owned," he added. "The two keys were the value of the facility re-investments we have made in what have become very popular amenities [including the new "Tavern on 18"—see "Out We Go," *C&RB*, March 2012], and creating a new leadership team."

Wait Until Next Year

Wallace is also proud of what's already been accomplished, but he—and all of his managers—really can't wait to see what they can do after a full summer of planning and preparation.

"We've made major strides in every operation, but the next building block is taking member and guest experiences to new



PHOTO COURTESY THE CLUB AT MEDITERRA

Mediterra's Beach Club offers an appealing alternative venue to members, many of whom dine at the club almost every day in season.

levels based on training and discipline, and not just riding the high energy that came with the first wave of improvement," he says. "We made a quantum leap towards our goal this year, and in the next few years we will be making smaller ones. Instead of taking a breather in the summer, we will continue to work hard so that by next season, standards are pre-established and the roadmap to success is fully drawn."

When that's done, it only stands to add more interesting chapters to what Dill already calls "a good story" again.

"From the brink of going under, we've risen from the ashes, and generated huge momentum," he says. "Once again, we're now the place to be."

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