

Perseverance Pays Off at Two Philadelphia-Area Clubs

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By Joe Barks, Editor of Club + Resort Business

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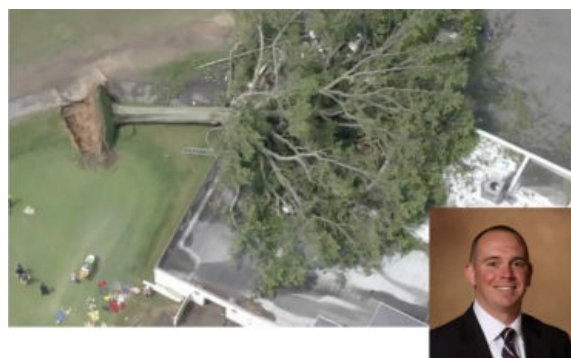


Despite a staff tragedy that added to the disruption brought by the pandemic, Philmont Country Club in Huntingdon Valley, Pa. and White Manor Country Club in Malvern, Pa. have continued to find new ways to move forward in a competitive market.

All clubs were put to the test like never before in 2020, and more than a few had to cope with the pandemic's personal assault on the health of their membership and staff, in addition to the disruption it caused for club operations.

Philmont Country Club in Huntingdon Valley, Pa., had to also grapple separately with an unspeakable tragedy, however, when a derecho straight-line windstorm with gusts approaching 90 miles per hour blew through its property in early June, toppling a massive tree onto a cart barn and killing the club's Head Golf Professional, Justin Riegel, as he rushed to try to get equipment stored safely.

The Philmont staff and many others throughout the club industry have since helped to promote a GoFundMe account for Riegel's family, which includes a son born after Riegel's death, that has grown to approach \$350,000. And Philmont is also planning other ways to honor Riegel's memory and provide additional support, such as annual golf tournaments.



The staff and membership of Philmont CC had the additional burden in 2020 of coping with the tragic death of Head Golf Professional Justin Riegel, who was killed on site when a derecho straight-line windstorm toppled a massive tree onto a building while he was inside.

In coping with the tragedy while continuing to serve its membership under the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, the Philmont staff drew support from **White Manor Country Club** in Malvern, Pa., another Philadelphia-area suburb. Both clubs were acquired by Concert Golf Partners a few years earlier, through arrangements that saw Concert pay off their existing debt and pledge to fund additional improvements without member assessments, to help regain the status and momentum that had been slipping away for both properties in a highly competitive market.

Even with the unexpected and unfortunate developments of 2020, both clubs continued to make progress with their turnarounds. While they are distinctly different properties and operate largely independently, their affiliation to each other and connection to the larger Concert network (22 clubs in 11 states, plus membership in Pacific Links International's worldwide group) has provided access to valuable additional resources that have helped both clubs find impressive ways to stand out in a crowded field and position themselves well for future growth.

MEMBERS AT THE DOORSTEP

Philmont has especially strong ties to Philadelphia history and tradition. Its founders in 1906 included department-store scion Ellis Gimbel, and its North golf course includes holes designed by William Flynn, who also put his stamp on Merion Golf Club.



Philmont CC's new 1906 Grille and patio, one of the initial capital improvements funded by Concert Golf Partners after its acquisition of the club, proved to be especially valuable, and popular, as the club has operated under restricted conditions.

Philmont's sprawling white clubhouse was built in 1913 and still dominates the property. Many of its vast rooms, however, including its 5,000-sq. ft. ballroom, had to stay largely empty in 2020 because of restrictions on gatherings. But Philmont now also has an adjacent building that includes the newly renovated 1906 Grille and outside patio, representing one of the initial capital improvements funded by Concert Golf after it acquired the club.

The 1906 Grille and especially its patio area—which was built by leveling a substantial grassy knoll and extending stone to the edge of the green of the newly designed 18th hole of Philmont's North Course—has proved to be especially popular while the club has operated under restricted conditions during the pandemic.

"It's become the place to come for lunch and dinner Wednesday through Sunday," says Chris Cissel, who became Philmont's new General Manager in August 2020, after being lured out of retirement from a successful career running Florida and Maryland properties by Philmont's "amazing property and history."

"Even on Monday and Tuesday, when we've just had a beverage cart out on the patio, it's still drawn a lot of people who want to hang out there on nice days," Cissel adds. "Our F&B team has also made good use of taking an outdoor grille out there, and other places on the property, so we've still been able to have some smaller outdoor events, too."

The view of the golf course from the 1906 Grille patio is just one of the vistas that have been opened up on the North Course, which features the classic design of Willie Park Jr., with additional contributions from Flynn. Also as a result of the Concert acquisition, the North Course, which debuted in 1923, was renovated in 2018 by Andrew Green, with an emphasis on using historical data to redesign and reposition bunkering.

The restoration, and views, have been further enhanced by tree-removal projects directed by Anthony “Hollywood” Johnson after his arrival in November 2019 to be Philmont’s new Head Grounds Superintendent. “It’s not clear-cutting,” says Johnson of the tree work that’s been done in-house. “We’re keeping a parkland style, but opening up vistas for more sunlight and air movement, which also promotes turf health.”

The North Course is now Philmont’s only 18-hole layout, after conversion of some of its South Course into a new three-hole loop that consists of a par 3, par 4 and par 5, all designed to offer an enjoyable short-course option. The rest of the South Course has been ticketed for a development project that will build 176 “active adult” (50-plus) townhomes on 60 acres and include social privileges at Philmont for buyers.

The project has been years in development, dating back to when Philmont was member-owned, and is still working its way through sticky litigation hurdles. But the prospect of the additional infusion of members that the development will literally bring to the club’s doorstep is only adding to the optimism that continues to pervade the property, even with all that it had to endure in 2020 (more positivity was generated at the end of 2020 by the arrival of Michael McCarragher from the respected St. Davids Golf Club in Wayne, Pa., to be Philmont’s new Head Golf Professional).

“With all that’s been done to change the narrative, Philmont is basically back already to the status it once had,” says Membership Director Russ Danyluk. “But we see the years that are coming as when we can really make a splash.”

A GREAT ESCAPE

The bucolic property that White Manor CC occupies amid the Philadelphia Main Line’s horse country has deep ties to the area as well—dating back, in fact, to the early 1700s, when it was part of a 1,700-acre plot granted to a settler’s family by none other than William Penn himself.



The land was a dairy farm (hence the club’s milk-jug logo) when it was bought in 1962 as a new location for the club, which was originally founded in 1948.

After a 2003 redesign and renovation of the golf course by Bobby Weed and other facility improvements, the club had difficulty working its way out of the debt that had been incurred, and was set back further by the Great Recession. That eventually led to its acquisition in 2017 by Concert Golf and changes, including dues reductions and new capital projects, that helped to start to turn around the declining membership.

By 2020, White Manor had become such an active, family-oriented club again, reports Executive Assistant Brandi Boyd, that a “tee sheet” had to be created to help control demand for using the pool, taking reservations for three-hour blocks of time. The golf course was also bustling, with Golf Director Mike Krick reporting a nearly

60% increase in rounds for the year from 2019. “And that was with us doing a grand total of nine rounds in April, when the course was shut down [by the pandemic],” Krick notes.

Krick and his wife Stacy came to the Philadelphia area in the spring of 2020 from Williamsburg, Va., where he was Director of Operations for Ford’s Colony Country Club. Stacy took on a dual role as Catering Director for both Philmont and White Manor, but says her title is really “Director of Happiness.” She has plunged in to keep the events pipeline full for both sites, successfully arranging smaller baby showers and “microweddings” this year for those who still wanted to commemorate milestones amid mandated restrictions, while also successfully rebooking many to create a strong outlook for 2021.

Events at White Manor have taken on added appeal because of the talents of the club’s new Executive Chef, Dylan McGovern, who arrived in the middle of 2020 for his first club position, bringing extensive experience from Michelin-star restaurants in Paris and elsewhere. Now striving to show members on a regular basis that “you don’t have to go New York City or Philadelphia for a memorable meal,” McGovern adds to the experience by creating special sugar and chocolate sculptures.

At a Glance:



The Philmont CC staff (left to right): Sarah Pickus, Accounts Manager; Dylan Bartholomew, Assistant Golf Professional; Michael McCarraher, Head Golf Professional; Anthony Johnson, Head Grounds Superintendent; Robert Castler, Food and Beverage Director; Matt Horton, Dining Room Manager; Chris Cissel, General Manager; Amber Derry, Sous Chef; Alex Bradford, Director of Facilities Management; Ryan Golay, Assistant Grounds Superintendent; Stacy Krick, Catering Director; Russell Danyluk, Membership Director. (Foreground: Gracie.)

Philmont Country Club

Location: Huntingdon Valley, Pa.

Founded: 1906

Golf Course Design: Willie Park Jr. and William Flynn, 1923 (Andrew Green renovation, 2018)

Annual Golf Rounds: 23,000

Members: 400

Main Clubhouse Size: 80,000 sq. ft.

At a Glance:



The White Manor CC staff (left to right): JP Dawson, Membership Director; Brandi Boyd, Executive Assistant; Mike Mulhare, Golf Superintendent; Dylan McGovern, Executive Chef; Bret Herspold, General Manager; Tricia Curcio, Accounting Manager; Stacy Krick, Catering Director; Mike Krick, Golf Director; Dan Loftus, Food and Beverage Service Manager.

White Manor Country Club

Location: Malvern, Pa.

Founded: 1948

Golf Course Design: Bobby Weed (2003 renovation)

Annual Golf Rounds: 31,500

Members: 375

Main Clubhouse Size: 42,000 sq. ft.