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The North Hills Club: **REINVENTED FOR THE FUTURE**

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North Hills Club: *Reinvented for the Future*

By Matt Zimmer

Photos by Bill Barnes Photography, Inc.



When he pauses now to look back on the renovation that has transformed Raleigh, NC's North Hills Club into one of the region's—if not the country's—premiere athletic and social clubs, general manager C.W. Cook does not mince his words: "If somebody had told me that all this would've happened five years ago, I would've told them that they were crazy," he said.

The reaction is understandable. How else would one react to a process that completely transformed a 46-year-old private club in an aggressive timeframe of little more than five years? However, as the saying goes, seeing is believing, and in an era when more and more clubs are facing dwindling membership numbers and feeling the pressure to throw open their doors and services to the public, North Hills Club has achieved the unthinkable—reaching their full membership cap of 700 families, with a waitlist at the time of printing of over 70 families waiting to join. All this from a club that went from initiation fees of just \$500 a little over 10 years ago to \$10,000 today, establishing North Hills as one of the most desirable memberships in the region to have.

How did they do it? With the commitment of a fearless board of directors to not only renovate their club—but also to reinvent their club's future.

Renovation & Reinvention

"Back in 2000, we had a very visionary board. What they were dealing with was a club that was 40 years old. Hardly any reinvestment had been done over that time. What was decided was that we have a perfect location here in Raleigh, and in many respects we had everything going for us, the board reasoned. If we didn't make a move, it was inevitable that the club was going to die a slow death," Cook said.

Consider the facts. North Hills' original clubhouse was only 12,000 square feet and had fallen into considerable disrepair over the years. To make matters worse,



Clockwise from top: Side entrance of the North Hills Club; the lap pool; the front face of the club; inside of the pro shop; a view of the pool slide from the pavilion

Aerial view of the North Hills Club



The tennis courts in play



The clubhouse overlooking the lap pool



The pool slide

their kitchen facilities measured less than 225 square feet—“barely capable of producing little more than a traditional snack bar offering,” Cook added. “No other modern club amenities were present and the club was little more than a neighborhood swim club with a reputation for having a very strong tennis program.”

As a result of the board’s planning, a long range planning committee was formed, and St. Louis-based McMahon Group conducted a survey of the membership in which valuable member input was obtained. The original vision was that the entire project would be done at once, but the members voted down that proposal. A second proposal—one that suggested dividing the project into two separate phases—ended up gaining approval.

Even in the early going, though, the process of transforming North Hills Club was not without pain. “The club lost a significant number of members when they approved the project, but regained them all in 18 months so the board felt that that was validation that they were on the right track,” Cook said.

Phase 1 officially began in 2002, and the selection of Raleigh-based Cline Design as the project architect came at the recommendation of the club’s then-president, who was familiar with the firm. “The board explained the



The kiddie pool as seen from above

things that they needed, and interestingly, they originally were looking at a renovation,” explained Mike Brooks, project manager for Cline Design. “However, many reasons ended up dictating that this be a phased project. While they originally felt that they didn’t have the money to redo the entire clubhouse, they realized that their existing structure was simply too small to achieve their goals.”

With the Phase 1 portion of the project, two of the club’s three existing swimming pools were brought up to a larger scale. In addition to the club’s lap swimming pool, North Hills’ main pool—a competition pool—added new features including a diving area and a water slide. With an emphasis placed on family-friendly features, the club’s new kid pool utilizes a resort style design with zero-entry area, along with novelty touches like plastic flowers that spray water.

Additionally, Phase 1 of the project saw the addition of a brand new poolhouse, with expansive wet locker room areas, a lifeguard room, and a club maintenance and tennis maintenance building. On the athletic side, four new clay courts were added, bringing the total number of courts at North Hills to 18. Improved lighting was incorporated throughout.



The pool house with deck chairs in the foreground



Seating areas surround the pools



The pavilion; INSET: Inside of the pavilion



Landscape details surrounding the pool area



Overlooking the playground from inside the pavilion

Of particular importance to North Hills' revenue-generating potential was the construction of a brand new outdoor event pavilion, an impressive hosting area capable of 100-person seating and accented with an attractive built-in fireplace.

Construction on Phase 1 was concluded in 2004, and C.W. Cook was brought aboard as general manager in 2005 just as the club was gearing up for Phase 2. "As is the case with many of these type of projects, we had a tough time winning over the membership for the second phase of the project. Some of the members appreciated what was done as the result of Phase 1 and were eager to get started on the next phase. On the other hand, there were those who stayed on through Phase 1 but were not excited about having any more changes. There was a clear split amongst the membership at that point in time," he said.

"We went through many meetings as we tried to move forward, but the fact of the matter is that you rarely get a full consensus on this size of project. As a result, we ended up losing 110 members as their resignations trickled in. Our board was steadfast, though, and they had budgeted in for heavy attrition, anticipating the resignations could go as high as 140." While many clubs would've gone un-

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The pro shop; INSET: Interior views of the pro shop



The ballroom



The dining room

der with such a significant decline in revenue, the board had the foresight to build up reserves to weather the storm of the club's transition.

Bigger, Better... And More Profitable

With the conclusion of Phase 1 in 2004, Cline Design eventually received the notice to proceed with Phase 2 on March 27th, 2006. At the top of the list of objectives for Phase 2 was to find new ways to increase North Hills' revenue from events. "Before the completion of this project, we were getting virtually nothing from events. What we were dealing with was an old facility that was way outdated," Cook said. Mike Brooks of Cline Design agreed, "With all of the competition that has sprung up in the Raleigh area, North Hills was losing some business to other clubs."

With demolition of the old clubhouse already underway, C.W. Cook and his team had to find creative ways to continue to serve their membership as their season began in May of that year. "We set up two sets of temporary trailers. One was an office which doubled as a tennis pro shop," he said. "The other was set up for a food and beverage offering. Out by the covered pool deck we set up a temporary kitchen where we grilled 120 days in a

row. Since we're in a remote area we arranged an account with a local propane company to help us keep everything fired up and running."

Their efforts didn't go unnoticed by the membership. "They were blown away that we went to such lengths to provide them with food and beverage service," Cook noted. "We definitely wanted to keep a full offering going."

With its official opening in March of this year after a year of construction, the new clubhouse facilities on the food and beverage side include a 66-seat casual dining restaurant, 55-seat adult lounge, 200-seat ballroom, kids' snack bar, and an outdoor lounge. North Hills' average member age of 39 has played a significant role in the club's emphasis now on casual dining, with family-friendly fare available at several points around the club.

The first point of emphasis was to greatly improve North Hills' kitchen. As mentioned earlier, the original kitchen measured a mere 225 square feet. By contrast, "our new cold storage area alone is bigger than the old kitchen," Cook said.




Furthermore, the placement of the kitchen in the overall design of the new clubhouse was made so that it is centrally located amongst all of the club's various food and beverage areas. "To the right of the kitchen on one side is the ballroom, and to the left is the main dining room,"




The bar



North Hills staff, from left to right: Matthew Britelle, Sous Chef; Shane Wells, Director of Tennis; Tom Budd, Executive Chef; Gayle Radford, Business Manager; Luke Heinsohn, Asst. Clubhouse Manager; C.J. Handron, Clubhouse Manager; C.W. Cook, General Manager; Barbara Pittman, Administrative Asst.; Ricky Jones, Maintenance Engineer; and Todd Love, Asst. Clubhouse Manager

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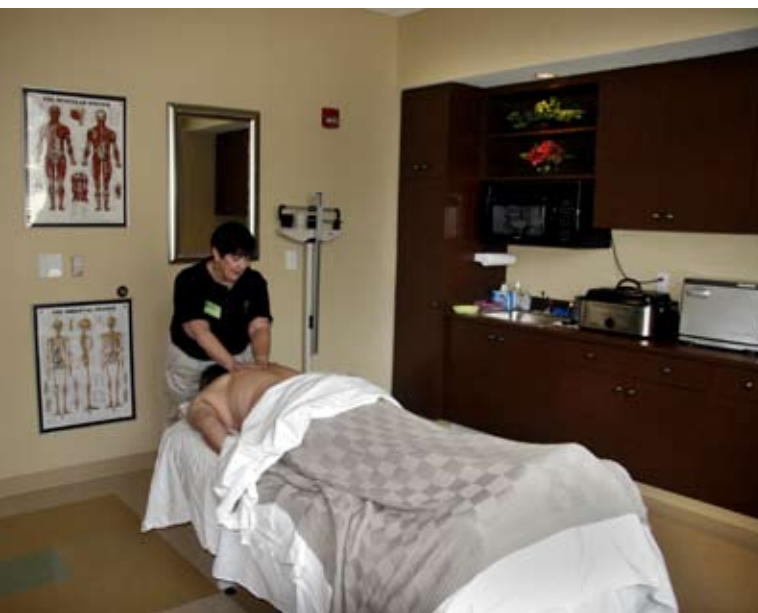
The weight room



The dance studio



Inside the men's locker room



Massage therapy

Brooks said. "And on the backside you can walk right out of the kitchen and into the two snack bars." This configuration—with one central location providing all of the food and beverage service—also means that members can order any food item they want regardless of where they are.

The snack bars in particular have proven to be a big hit with the membership, having been integrated into the space beneath the large 8,000-square-foot outdoor patio that surrounds the new clubhouse, offering panoramic views of the entire property. The first snack bar is longer and geared toward the adults with a sit-down area that serves drinks. This section is partitioned off from the kids' snack bar by roll top doors.

"Feedback from members suggested that the kids often take up more time in line, so we were able to speed up service time by making the adult lounge and kids' area separate," Cook said.

In addition to pleasing members, the casual dining options at North Hills have also helped the club's bottom line. As Cook explained, the club went from having 10 people a day for lunch on a good day to now getting 60 to 70 covers per day.

Even more impressive: "In 2005, the most revenue we had ever earned from events totaled \$70,000. This year alone we've brought in \$400,000 just from catering. Overall, we've taken what was a \$200,000 food and beverage operation and converted it into a \$750,000 operation. Two-thirds of that is from events and the rest is from member dining."

In terms of staffing, North Hills runs their food and beverage business with a staff of 20, all drawn from the local area. Cook notes that the club has been lucky to avoid many of the labor shortages that other clubs around the country are facing right now, despite the fact that the Raleigh area is experiencing its lowest unemployment rate in six years.

Active Families, Active Club

First and foremost a premiere athletic club, North Hills' new clubhouse also features a 3,000-square-foot fitness center, aerobic room, men's and women's locker rooms each complete with a steam room, and a separate massage therapy room, which is staffed and maintained by an outside vendor.

The fitness center itself comes equipped with 13 pieces of top-of-the-line cardio equipment, each having its own individual TV screen built right in. "Members just have to bring their own headphones and plug them in," Cook said. In addition to the cardio are 50 different weight training stations, as well as six pieces of Hammer Strength weight equipment.

As mentioned above, the massage therapy room at North Hills is outsourced to a local company that maintains a staff of seven to eight therapists. "Phones are directly tied into that company, and the charges are integrated with our billing," Cook explained. While the massage services themselves are not yet profitable at this point, "we were primarily wanting members to be able to take advantage of this amenity," he said.

The fitness center is staffed by a fitness center director and four personal trainers. In contrast to the old fitness area—which measured less than 500 square feet—the men's and ladies' locker rooms each have their own built-in steam rooms. Brooks noted, "They went from having metal lockers to wooden lockers with a built-in digi-lock system, so the members wouldn't have to worry about having their own combination lock."

For busy parents who need someone to watch the kids while they grab a quick workout, North Hills added a child care activity room. "Members came to us with this idea, and we decided it would be a nice service to be able to let the kids play while their parents enjoyed some of the club's other amenities. It's not a daycare service—as this would involve different issues related to staffing and insurance—and the parents can only use the service while they're on the club's grounds. Currently it's staffed by three people for 15 available spots."

Speaking of kids, youth activities are particularly important at North Hills Club, with many specialty programs designed for youngsters during the summer season. "We have an eight week summer camp, a tennis camp, 'mad science' shows, kids' cooking classes, and even a dinosaur dig, in which the kids will go digging for fossils," Cook said. "We have a very active social committee who goes out of their way to make sure we have plenty of fun activities for families and kids."

A Bright Future

The changes that have occurred at North Hills over the last five years have placed the club on solid financial footing as they move forward to the years ahead—all based on the value of the membership.

"We're currently bringing in three new applicants per week," Cook said. "For a racquet club to cross the \$10,000 initiation fee threshold, you're definitely in small company." ■



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