

Making a Splash

A solid water recreation program can be a family-friendly amenity that reinforces member and guest loyalty.

by Heather Gooch

Water, in its many forms, offers universal appeal. Whether it's a relaxing spa, an exercise environment, a bustling pool or simply a backdrop against which members and guests can enjoy a fun evening outdoors, chances are good that your water amenities have grown to become a more important part of what your facility has to offer.

The question is, even with this increased level of activity, are you still doing all you can to maximize the appeal and potential of your water recreation programs?

Maureen Kindred, Membership Director of Ballantyne Country Club in Charlotte, N.C., notes that her club now offers an array of water programs, including swim lessons, lap swim and water aerobics. The Ballantyne Barracudas swim team has been a part of the club since it opened in 1996, and the program overall has grown to a point where Ballantyne is currently hiring an Aquatics Director.

"Previously, our activities director served both roles," Kindred explains. "We feel the new position will further enhance the aquatics experience for our members."

Tom Merritt has had 15 years of experience as a pool manager, the last two at Oak Lane Golf & Country Club in Woodbridge, Conn. He stresses that it is important to include "something for everyone" in a water amenity program. For Oak Lane, that translates to a competitive swim team, lessons for kids and adults, and a newly formed water aerobics program.

Oak Lane now has three pool areas for the different needs of its members and guests, Merritt adds. "The fountain pool, which we installed about five years ago, is for children five and under and their parents," he says. "The family pool is heated to 83°F each day. The adult pool is not heated and is used for 18-and-over only. Both pools are '49 years young,' but we put a lot of work into maintenance and upkeep, so that they don't seem their age."

Jay Carrieri, Oak Lane's General Manager, adds that the water program really appeals to families, whose alternative pool options at home or elsewhere may not offer such amenities as air-conditioned locker rooms and cabanas, or swim diapers and eye goggles for sale.

Wetting Their Appetites

Damon DeVito, Managing Director of Affinity Management, which owns the 40-year-old Ferncroft Country Club in Middleton, Mass., agrees that an active water program can be the key to marketing to the young families that are increasingly forming the heart of today's club memberships.

When Affinity took over Ferncroft a few years ago, it was the first time in decades that the pool area would be managed by the owners and not leased to a third party, whose primary focus was a hotel pool area about a quarter-mile away.

“When we took ownership, we had consultants saying ‘fill in the pool and tennis courts, and focus on the golf,’ ” DeVito recalls. “While there’s a case to be made for taking that tactic—to go where the money is, so to speak—we saw the clear potential of being a family-oriented facility.

“Families are the future of the club,” he continues. “And parents go where the kids go. Mom and Dad might like the golf, but it’s the additional programs we offer that are going to make them decide that we’re an integral part of their lifestyle, and continue their memberships year after year.”

At the start, there were no social-only members at Ferncroft, DeVito says. Realizing there was nowhere to go but up, the first thing Affinity did was to install a pool heater and construct cabanas for shade. Then, after realizing that the volleyball beach at the pool area wasn't getting much use, DeVito and his team took down the net and turned the area into a destination for every kid who wants to push a toy truck or shovel around after a swim. The area now also includes a colorful jungle gym that's used heavily by junior members.

“Now, there’s literally a social member waiting list during the summer season,” he reports. “Kids are restless, they beg to go swimming and then after a while they tell their parents they want to go home. But with the sand pit, the playground, and even a wiffleball field on site, they’re less likely to get bored. This means the family stays longer—and the club earns its dues.”

Playgrounds and Ponds

Ann Lane, Advertising and Public Relations Director for Arizona's Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort and Spa at Gainey Ranch, says her facilities aren't just pools; instead, they're part of a 2.5-acre “water playground.” The resort, which opened in December 1986, is giving that playground a fresh look this spring, with all-new patio furniture (featuring a different color palette to denote adult-only areas, family areas, etc.) and rentable cabanas replete with flat-screen TVs.

“We have 10 pools—including pools for two, water volleyball, and a sand beach,” Lane explains. “They feature Grecian-style waterfalls. At night, it's sexy and sophisticated. By day, it's cool and inviting.” With a guest composition of approximately 60% group/40% leisure, she adds, the pools are a main focal point of the property.

As part of a growing focus on fitness, a water aerobics class for guests is new at Gainey Ranch this year. In addition, a French-Celtic mineral pool at the spa offers soothing relief and relaxation, as does a nearby Jacuzzi. The spa also includes a Kneipp pool, where extremely cold water is designed to therapeutically work on tired reflexive muscles.

There's even an aquatically balanced lagoon pond, under the care of the property's Director of Water Features. The fish, turtles and plants that reside in the pond keep it crystal-clear without any chemicals—and Lane says it's a big draw for guests to admire as they stroll along the grounds.

Jackie Grabow, the property's Director of Activities, notes that many guests come to Gainey Ranch for an "experiential vacation." With that in mind, she and her team plan a variety of unique poolside events, such as "beach blanket bingo," sand castle contests, and even a birds-of-prey presentation.

"We use a radar gun to clock 'speed water slide' contests," she adds, "and we have 'dive-in movies' on Saturday nights, where the kids can float on inner tubes in the water and parents turn their beach chairs around to watch."

In the past, tiki-style huts around the Gainey Ranch pool area have offered such resort services as mini-spas and hair braiding. Families could also enjoy making their own sundaes, s'mores, caramel apples and cornhusk dolls.

The Pool is the Place



Ferncroft CC uses its pool areas for banquets and parties, turning cabanas into stations and the snack area into a full-service bar.

Increasingly, private clubs are following resorts' lead in making pools the center of planned activities.

"Poolside is the place to be for cookouts for Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day," notes Oak Lane's Carrieri. His club now has a full schedule of nights with activities designed for 8 and under, 10 and under, 13 and over, and adults. "Raft-ins" are Oak Lane's version of poolside movie nights, and the pool's Opening Day event includes everything from relay contests to an inflatable bouncing castle.

Even for golf-oriented events, clubs are finding inventive ways to use the pool. "For one men's tournament, we purchased a floating chipping green, which was a big hit," says Damon DeVito of Ferncroft CC. "We also had a celebrity putt-putt event, featuring [Boston Red Sox catcher] Jason Varitek. The sponsor wanted a private, pre-event cocktail party, and we thought, 'What better place than the fenced-in pool area?'" The cabanas were used to display items for a charity auction, and the snack bar was transformed into a fully stocked bar.

"I feel we're just scratching the surface of what our pool area can do for us," DeVito concludes.

Devoted Duties

As pools become more active, however, sound management practices become even more important. At Gainey Ranch, Grabow believes that a half-hour rotation schedule for attendants at the slide and pool areas makes a big difference in providing the best possible levels of service and safety. “When you change every 30 minutes, you’re getting a new person who’s fresh and attentive,” she says.

The Scottsdale Hyatt also places importance on its poolside towel service, where one staffer mans the towel bar while a “runner” ensures there is plenty of fresh inventory. The runner also handles bike rentals and helmet fits.

Another team member serves as “pool rover,” to straighten chairs, pick up towels and generally patrol the area. “Everyone is certified in CPR, First Aid and water safety, and we use Nextel units to communicate,” Grabow adds.

Jennifer Schaff, the Scottsdale Hyatt’s Director of Engineering, oversees a water maintenance department comprised of four full-time staffers who test each pool three times daily, following Association of Pool & Spa Professionals regulations for chemical balancing.

“There’s a lot of cross-training,” says Schaff, who notes the team is not only responsible for the recreational pools, but the mineral spa pool and the pond as well. “We are concentrating throughout the day on cleanliness and preventative maintenance. It may seem like a simple task, but it’s such an important one.”

At Oak Lane, Merritt says his five full-time and two part-time lifeguards serve seven-hour shifts, with duties that include keeping the area’s restrooms clean. “I don’t use a program to schedule guards, because we need to be flexible to accommodate rain days, birthday parties and member parties,” he notes.

Frequent staff rotations and communication are poolside hallmarks at the Ballantyne Club, and Kindred notes that portable safety kits are attached to all of the lifeguard stands. In addition, she says, it’s helpful to have extra eyes on the kids. “Members are very supportive and help back up the lifeguards,” she says.

DeVito says a “nanny policy,” where members can pay a reduced member fee for their babysitter, has been well-received at Ferncroft CC. “When the alternatives are either not coming at all or dropping kids off unsupervised, this has been a great alternative for many working families,” he



Ferncroft CC offers a “nanny policy,” so members can pay a reduced member fee for their babysitters to attend to the kids while at the club.

says. “Having a child supervised is important not only from a safety standpoint, but when an unsupervised child gets bored and wants to go home but cannot, he or she is having a negative experience—which ultimately can influence the parents’ decision whether to continue membership.”

The biggest key to a successful water recreation program, DeVito stresses, is managerial support. From towels to tiki huts, swim lessons to events, if the program is treated as an afterthought, it becomes one.

Lane agrees. “There’s a sense of personal pride among the staff that things are kept up and running so well,” she says. “Ownership allows us to keep things as they should be.”

What’s a Swim Without a Snack?

While many of us recall from our youth that a trip to the pool would usually include a slice of pizza, a soda and/or an ice cream cone, today’s consumers can be a little more sophisticated. Nachos and hot dogs are still mainstays, of course, but now the typical poolside menu also includes such healthy options as carrot sticks, salads, wraps, fruit smoothies and frozen yogurt.

“We sell hot dogs and fries, but it’s also about what Mom wants,” says Ferncroft Country Club’s Managing Director, Damon DeVito. “Some parents are OK with the fried food; others want something more nutritious for their kids—and themselves. We try to offer a variety of options.”

Ferncroft also offers a full bar poolside, which DeVito notes is a welcome respite for parents who come to the club with the kids after work, and can wind down with a cocktail, looking on as the kids splash and play in the pool.

Jay Carrieri, General Manager of Oak Lane Golf & Country Club, says his club’s snack bar now offers guests salads, wraps and a pub menu seven days a week. “On busy days, we add additional staff, so everyone’s food and beverage needs are met,” he adds.

At the Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort and Spa at Gainey Ranch, F&B has always been a big part of the pool program. From poolside service to poolside bars, there’s something for everyone. “It’s Arizona; you need to stay hydrated when you’re in the sun all day,” points out Ann Lane, Advertising and PR Director.

And while Ballantyne Country Club sees its fair share of salad sales poolside, its adult beverages, hot dogs and candy are equally popular. The biggest seller? “Ice cream, ice cream, ice cream!” quips Maureen Kindred, Membership Director.

It’s good to know some things never change.