



# Country Club Fitness Expertise

**DOUGLAS BAUMGARTEN, FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF COUNTRY CLUB FITNESS, ROCKVILLE, MD., HAS SPENT THE PAST 20 YEARS HELPING PRIVATE COUNTRY CLUBS TO EXPAND THEIR SERVICES TO MEET THE EVER-GROWING FITNESS DEMANDS OF MEMBERS.**

*By Ronale Tucker Rhodes, M.S.,*

*Editorial Director*



## In what year did you start Country Club Fitness, and how did the company come about?

I started the company in 1985 as Personal Fitness Inc. (still the legal name), when I saw a lack of fitness instruction, especially personal training services, in private clubs.

## How much has CCF grown since its inception?

We started [by] just providing trainers to two clubs in the Washington, D.C., area. We now manage 14 private club facilities, from Pennsylvania to Florida, and have expanded our services to include facility design, equipment procurement and total facility management. As such, we have consulted to dozens of clubs on facility planning, design and management.

## Who are CCF's customers, and how do you serve them?

We have focused primarily on the private club market, as that's where the greatest need is. Our goal is to provide the fitness expertise and management efficiency that private clubs don't have — at least in health/fitness. Many clubs want to add health/fitness facilities to golf, tennis or other amenities, but don't want to add a new employee department or [have] management headaches. For those clubs, we provide an outsourced solution — complete facility management, staffing and cutting-edge fitness programs for members. We offer all of our clubs a complete range of fitness programs, including fitness assessment for all members, facility supervision and maintenance, high-quality personal training services, a wide range of exercise class options and leisure options, such as massage therapy or spa services. In the future, we plan to expand our consulting reach to other types of facilities, possibly corporate or commercial, that would benefit from our expertise in design and management.

## Does CCF have any competition? What sets you apart from the competition?

We have very few competitors, as there are few companies who understand the private club market as we do. Our main competitor's business is spread over several markets, with an emphasis on resorts and spa services. Our strength is our focus on private clubs, which have a unique structure, as well as high standards for day-to-day member service. We are renowned for recruiting, hiring and training fitness personnel who can deliver quality programming, while maintaining private club standards.

## What have been some of your greatest management challenges, and how have they transformed CCF into what it is today?

Understanding the private club industry has been challenging, to say the least. Unlike commercial or corporate entities, private clubs are typically managed by committee — a board of directors and various sub-committees — rather than from the top down. This not only makes it difficult to identify a decision-maker for sales purposes, it means every major club decision, including engaging an outside firm, must be approved by an entire board — often *after* being approved by a general

manager or subcommittee. Since private clubs change their boards every year, this can be a daunting process — and sometimes must be done more than once at the same club! As a result, we have developed the 'patience of Job.' We understand that the sales process at private clubs — especially when discussing a new facility or program — can extend for years.

Another challenge is hiring and training staff who can fit the private club 'mold.' Private clubs have strict standards of behavior, appearance and service for all staff; hires coming from the commercial fitness environment are often treated to culture shock at an affluent country club.

Finally, our financial challenges are significant. Private clubs, being member-owned, are essentially non-profit cooperatives. As such, they are *very* careful about spending funds. In addition, golf, tennis, dining and pool operations require huge operating budgets, which often leaves fitness fighting for every dollar. When there is no established fitness constituency at a club, this can be an uphill battle.

## Tell us about some of your greatest success stories?

In 1986, we took over fitness management at Congressional Country Club one month before the scheduled opening of a new facility. The club had carved out 750 square feet (considered a significant commitment in those days) and purchased a Nautilus circuit, but had no idea how to manage the facility or service the members. Nineteen years later, the facility has expanded four times (now 2,000 square feet and still crowded), supports more than 150 member visits per day and generates more than \$300,000 per year in personal training revenue.

At Maryland Club, a city athletic club in Baltimore, we took over a new facility in 1996, and have revitalized the athletic department, previously limited to squash. At Bethesda Country Club, we designed their facility in 1995, but lost the management contract to a competitor. In 1998, the club came back to us for management, and we have upgraded the service and programs ever since.

## What do you envision the future will be for the vertical fitness industry?

There is still huge potential in the private and country club market. The majority of these clubs still don't have fitness facilities, and many are now starting to plan for them. Although many of these clubs are small in terms of membership, they probably represent the largest untapped market — outside of completely sedentary individuals — in the fitness industry. In addition, many new housing developers, particularly in retirement communities in the Sun Belt, are installing fitness facilities with golf courses or [as part of] gated communities.

The outlook for corporate fitness is, I believe, less rosy. Many large companies already have fitness/wellness programs, and the largest growth is in very small businesses, which often can't support such programs. That market is also subject to two other forces: the state of the economy in general, and the structure of the insurance industry. If the economy turns downward, or insurance moves away from being largely paid by employers — both of which could happen — then the corporate fitness market will likely shrink. **FOS**

“There is still huge potential [for fitness] in the private and country club market.”