

Mike Leemhuis

Extraordinary Leadership in Extraordinary Times

CONGRESSIONAL COO TAKES REINS AS CMAA PRESIDENT

BY RICK COYNE



Starting out in life we rarely know exactly where it may lead us. Along the way, the lucky have parents, friends, and mentors who offer us eclectic experiences and guidance, shaping what we eventually become. In fact, if we're really lucky, these mentors continue to be a source of wisdom as we continue to grow. Such is the learning process.

Mike Leemhuis grew up in Pretoria, South Africa, the son of a tradesman with a mother who was a bookkeeper and one of Mike's greatest mentors. Throughout an athletic youth he was encouraged by his parents to steer his studies toward a stable degree in accounting, which was as foreign to him as imagining himself one day being the Chief Operating Officer of Congressional Country Club. Sports were his passion and he knew it was where he belonged.

Throughout his younger years, Mike continued with for sports, a path which ultimately led him to an undergraduate degree from Wits University in teaching, specializing in physical education and history, and twice becoming not only a contestant in the Hawaiian Ironman competition, but a finisher.

After college graduation in 1976, Mike taught physical education and history at the prestigious King Edward VII school in Johannesburg. He taught Gary Player's son Wayne and later became good friends with the Player family. However, after three years Mike was drawn to the United States to further his studies in sport and spent the



next two semesters at California's UCLA; and managing a U.S. rugby tour, at which he first met Dale, his lovely wife of 26 years. However, Mike ran out of money and had to return to South Africa in 1981 where he joined the Rennies group, hotel, resort and casino operators for the next four years.

From then and before returning permanently to the U.S. in 1997, Mike managed and operated the Gary Player Country Club and Lost City Golf Course at the world renowned, Sun City resort in Johannesburg. He also managed and operated Sports International, a sports management company and managed Ellis Park, an 80,000-seat sports stadium.

But Mike's mission in life would not stop there. In fact, after leaving the Ellis Park position, Mike's dad asked him why he would leave such a great job. Mike simply replied that, "There was much more that he had to do", a quest that eventually resulted in the purchase of his one-way ticket to the U.S.

Mike's path has led to many accomplishments including his earning Class A PGA golf professional status, working with the PGA Tour and managing the TPC at Avenel and earning a Masters degree in education, specializing in

sports administration and management from East Carolina University. Additionally, Mike has earned his CCM and CCE and was most recently elected the 2009 president of the Club Managers Association of America. In fact, Mike is the first PGA Professional to hold the position of president of CMAA.

Landing in the place he loves, 10 years ago Mike assumed general manager and chief operating officer responsibilities for Congressional Country Club, host to the 1995 Senior

LANDING IN THE PLACE HE LOVES, 10 YEARS AGO MIKE ASSUMED GENERAL MANAGER AND CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER RESPONSIBILITIES FOR CONGRESSIONAL COUNTRY CLUB, HOST TO THE 1995 SENIOR OPEN, 1997 U.S. OPEN, THE ATT NATIONAL IN 2007 AND 2008; HOST FOR THE TIGER WOODS ATT NATIONAL IN 2009 AND THE HOME OF THE 2011 U.S. OPEN.

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SEE COVER STORY - PAGE 26

Last and by far not least, Mike has a lovely family with wife Dale and their two sons, 21 year-old Mathew and 17 year-old Joshua. They currently reside together in Potomac, Maryland.

Having known Mike for many years, I've always been struck by his passion for his work and his industry, his willingness to share his thoughts and ideas and the extraordinary care he gives his members, his staff and his peers. With a passion for such extraordinary leadership Mike shares with us some of his philosophies that have carried him over his extraordinary career.

BoardRoom - Mike, you have accomplished a great deal in such a relatively short amount of time. What was your major driving force for accomplishing so many great things?

Mike Leemhuis - Initially, it was really about having all the "arrows in my quiver" that might be necessary to professionally address any situation. I had great parents that evoked a strong work ethic in me. My mom was really the central point of helping me understand that I could do anything I set my mind to do. Along the way, I also realized that to become a good leader I had to set an example. My work ethic had to be strong and to accomplish my objectives required focus, perseverance and persistence.

ML - It certainly was never my vision to be either. However, I knew that leadership in the sporting arena was something that I needed to prepare for no matter what the opportunity might be. In retrospect, I believe that my success in anything that I have done has been possible because of my work ethic and preparation.

BR - In extraordinarily different economic times, what values and leadership skills do you think are most important to keep our clubs vibrant, our members happy and our staff confident?

ML - Don't panic. Just because you might not have gone through a situation like this doesn't mean it's the end of the world. This situation will correct itself and make us stronger and better managers on the other side. I went through a time like this at Sun City and it was no fun, but in the end I believe the experience made me a better person and manager.

Then remember this from Jack Welsh of General Electric, "Communicate, Communicate, Communicate - when you think you have communicated enough, communicate some more." As managers/leaders in our industry, we are being looked at by our members and staff to handle the situation at our clubs. We need to do this in a calm, rational and informed way, communicating to everyone as we go along.

You really have to be sure that your club IS a safe haven and that it is a home away to communicate this to your members. You need to share with them that during these and their suggestions. Someone who does this very well is Jay DiPietro at Boca West reason to ever leave the club complex. Everything a member could want is available. It happened because Jay planned carefully and continues to ask his members what

Leadership by example required that I have the energy and the drive, that I was willing to commit the necessary time to achieve success and that I would not stop until I had achieved my goal. By and large, my driving force has been to set a good example.

BR - As a young man in Pretoria did you ever stop to think that you might one day be the COO of one of the most prestigious private clubs in the world or become the president of one of the world's leading industry associations, CMAA?

BR - It would seem that creating and maintaining connections on many levels will be important to helping members continue seeing their club as their safe haven and home away from home. What advice can you offer managers seeking to project this message?

ML - For this to happen you really have to be sure that your club IS a safe haven and that it is a home away from home. If this is the case you need to communicate this to your members. You need to share with them that during these times you need their help, their input, and their sug-

gestions. Someone who does this very well is Jay DiPietro at Boca West Country Club, where there is actually no reason to ever leave the club complex. Everything a member could want is available. This didn't happen overnight. It happened because Jay planned carefully and continues to ask his members what they want.

BR – Some clubs have already begun to experience “panic” on one or more levels of leadership. In times of difficulty, what are the most important factors for a club to understand and project both to members and to their staff?

ML – Panic, on any leadership level is obviously never a good sign! My advice includes the following;

1. Vision – Be able to see that what you are doing today will take you into the future

2. Motivation – You need to understand what motivates your people to action. This is true for all of the stakeholders of the club including staff and members

3. Empower – Empowerment is a powerful process. Empower both members and staff to help with the specific situation facing your club

4. Risk – Be prepared to think outside the box and do things differently than what you are used to doing. Take risks but make sure they are calculated risks that do not compromise yours or the club's integrity.

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5. Focus – Stay focused on the situation at hand. You need to be constantly researching everything out there that potentially improves your present situation. The most important element of focus is follow through!

BR – What's next on your vision quest, Mike?

ML – What's next? I love what I do at Congressional and with our great CMAA association. I would be happy to continue down this road to retirement. The fun part of my job is that it is forever changing! We have the U.S. Open in

2011, the ATT National in 2007, 2008 and 2009, a \$25 million dollar renovation/master plan to the clubhouse, new greens on our famed Blue Courses – the list just goes on and on. It's what keeps my interest and my focus at this great historical private club.

You can't stay still, you have to keep moving! I will continue to serve CMAA however I am needed. It's a GREAT association, with lots of great people and friends. My goal is to leave it just a little better than I found it.

On the personal side I'm sure I still have a couple of marathons or triathlons in me, but most importantly, with the help of my wife Dale, is to guide our two boys, Matt and Josh, to be the very best people that they can be.

During our interview Mike spoke about the influence of mentors, family and friends in his life, his successes and the way that he sees the role of leadership. Obviously, in a career that has spanned two continents and includes operational responsibility for facilities such as Sun City, TPC at Avenel and Congressional, there have been many such influences. Mike responded that he had been blessed to have had many mentors, starting with his mother who had tremendous impact on shaping what he is today.

He indicated that he learned the importance of quality and standards from his time at Sun City and credits **John Small**, his supervisor and mentor. From **Mark McCormick** he learned the importance of time management and follow through. From **Peter Burwash** he learned the importance of sticking to what he believed in and following through until the end. From **Gary Player** he learned that work ethic and perseverance are keys to both success and great leadership skills. From **Jim Singerling** he learned the importance of vision and the persistence to stay on track.

Here's what some of Mike's mentors had to say.

Jim Singerling - Chief Executive Officer of the Club Managers Association of America

I've known Mike for many years and always respected his vision. As a member of Congressional, along with my family, it is a sincere honor to see the globally recognized leadership Mike Leemhuis exhibits in our club every day. Mike has always been very comfortable engaging guests and members as though he has known them forever, a difficult ability, but the only way that a true leader can be effective.

Michael's background as an educator is a valuable resource to CMAA. As we pursue the essence and purpose of our professional association, Mike's background as a business leader is essential in today's successful world of business. The club business is not a hobby or a past-time. The club business is responsible for the jobs and livelihood of tens of thousands of employees of clubs. It is responsible for provid-

SEE COVER STORY - PAGE 110

ing the quality of life to the most successful individuals in every community in which a club exists. It is comforting to know that the club management profession will have the vision and leadership of such a talented professional.

Clubs are the most sustainable small business in every community. We have an obligation to listen to the leadership provided by successful professionals like Mike Leemhuis who understand the business of club management and to get beyond the reluctance to change. If our industry is going to continue to thrive we must think “ahead of the curve” as we continue to protect the traditions of the past. These two principles are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are our recipe for success.

John Small - Chairman of ResortCom International, a resort and financial services company based in San Diego.

I first met Mike when he was brought into Sun City as the head of the sport and recreation department, and was very taken by his openness and honesty and his willingness to admit to his lack of knowledge in food and beverage and financial accounting.

do whatever it took to deliver a superior product to the clients was astonishing. And when he traveled to the U.S. for golf business, he always came back with newer and better ways to do things.

Mike is a living, breathing example of someone constantly raising the bar, and challenging himself to be a better and better performer. By the time I left Sun City, he was probably the preeminent expert on golf course and club management in the country.

And to keep abreast of the best practices, he was always hounding me about this seminar, or that educational course, and naturally, I approved every single one of them, because the bottom line was always improved by his participation in such events.

I think Mike is probably one of the most intensely focused individuals I have ever had the pleasure of working with, and his determination and dedication has always been enormous, with his intelligence allowing him to learn faster than anyone with whom I have been associated.

Today, I would love to be able to work with him again, but have to be satisfied with the occasional visit to the Congressional, where he swells with pride, taking me around to look at the kitchens, discuss the menus, look at the merchandising of the pro shop, and on and on.

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~ John Small

He was like a sponge, soaking up every bit of information I could provide. There was so much to cover and so little time that we began running with the director of human resources each morning at 6 a.m. During these early morning runs, as the sun was coming up over the courses, and the resort would be coming to life, we talked about every subject under the sun.

I think it was on these runs that most of his “schoolroom” exposure to HR and to F & B took place. We discussed all of the various sequences of food buying, menu development, food and beverage cost control, staffing controls and standards, standards, standards and more. Over time, we would start to discuss the various aspects of the business that he was having challenges with, and we would work through solutions.

It was not too long before he was demonstrating some of the best practices in the entire complex, out performing some of the other general managers and putting those with big hospitality backgrounds to shame! But his willingness to

Mike is the consummate professional, and one of my best friends, our kids are best friends and our wives are best friends. He is like an athlete at the top of his game, with unlimited potential in his bag yet to be tapped.

I’m extremely proud of him and the knowledge and expertise he has gained in the almost 16 years we have been friends and associates. And as a fantastic byproduct, he has taught me the golf business and the sports management business, so this has been a long time collaboration of mutual passions that continues to push each of us along towards greater achievements and accomplishments.

My role today is to challenge him and to get him to think differently about his world, and to consider the wisdom and experience he needs to put to better use...nothing more and nothing less. He is like a finely tuned athlete, who you know has more to give and needs to believe in himself to the extent that he can deliver on his full potential.