



# 2016 Distinguished Ideas Summit

## Best of the Best

BY DAVE WHITE

**T**hanks for pulling off the Summit. It was one of the best conferences I've been to in my 35-plus years in the business! Union League made it extra special."

And that comment from Stephen Roper, general manager of the Meridian Hill Country Club in Indianapolis is typical of the kudos following the 2016 *Distinguished Ideas Summit* held recently at the Union League of Philadelphia.

"I enjoyed the format very much as the presenters were club managers who shared their successful programs and experiences with their peers. I picked up many beneficial ideas, which is the purpose of these conferences.

"The experience of networking with managers at the top of their field and enjoying the high-quality level of operations and facilities like the Union League and the Philadelphia Cricket Club," Roper added.



BoardRoom's *Distinguished Clubs* are truly a special grouping of private clubs...exceptional clubs based on their extraordinary delivery of a first-class **Member Experience** to each and every one of their members," explained Keith Jarrett, president of BoardRoom's *Distinguished Club* program.

"The *Distinguished Ideas Summit* is the most exclusive gathering of general managers of these most prestigious and successful *pDistinguished Clubs* private clubs. This private invitation-only event has been created specifically for, and is attended by, only fellow general managers of currently-awarded *Distinguished Clubs*," Jarrett added.

Speakers for each summit are pre-selected general managers telling how they create great *Member Experiences* with unique ideas and proven strategies at their clubs.

Jeff McFadden, general manager and COO and his staff at the prestigious Union League of Philadelphia have received many compliments by the participating general managers for their exceptional work as hosts for the Summit.

The Union League is an outstanding *Distinguished Emerald Club of the World*, one of the country's most historic clubs, founded in 1862, and built to support the Union and policies of Abraham Lincoln.

The Philadelphia Cricket Club and general manager Tim Muesle, co-hosted some of the activities. "Jeff and Tim were gracious hosts, always looking out to accommodate their peers," Roper opined.

"My professional experience includes working in three different 5-star resort hotel facilities and the Union League of Philadelphia exceeds all standard metrics in amenities, staff and cleanliness," expressed Craig Martin, general manager of St. Andrews Country Club in Boca Raton, FL.

"For example, the staff greeted me by name at every opportunity, offered a warm welcome and escorted me to destinations on property to ensure I wasn't lost wandering.

"It was another outstanding event put on by BoardRoom's *Distinguished Clubs* team....and a great opportunity to share best practices and learn about new and innovative operational techniques and programming that work.

“Overall the entire event is inspiring and challenges each one of us to continue elevating our member experience,” Martin added.

“The membership and professional staff at St. Andrews Country Club benefit from the new, fresh ideas other clubs have implemented and fine-tuned. Our professional staff meets upon my return to discuss the feasibility of integrating some, if not all, of the programs at our club. I find my participation motivates me by being around other leaders. It reenergizes my commitment to my personal and professional objectives which helps me to be a better leader to my team,” Martin explained.

“We’ve realize what we’ve created by showcasing the most outstanding private clubs across the country. It’s a model with a message that can help clubs grow and enhance their member experience. It’s quick and it’s a meaningful learning environment,” stressed John Fornaro, CEO of BoardRoom magazine and one of the innovators behind BoardRoom’s *Distinguished Club program*.

“When we were thinking of developing the concept of the *Distinguished Ideas Summit*, from a speaker’s perspective, we started with the usual way of thinking...then we paused and thought...these are the best clubs in the world with the best GMs in the world and they have the best ideas that they implement at their clubs, why not have them present member experience ideas to themselves? And the format was born,” explained Jarrett.

“So every year, during our onsite surveys to clubs, we look at the most unique ideas that we’ve haven’t seen before and then ask that GM to be a presenter at the Summit. The ideas are relevant and fresh and all the managers love it.

“We believe the *Distinguished Ideas Summit* is one of the best benefits of earning and retaining *Distinguished Clubs* status,” Jarrett injected.

“*Distinguished Ideas Summit* is not just an event, but also a different way of learning about what works for private clubs. The *Distinguished Clubs* award program aims to vitalize and preserve private clubs by fostering a ceaseless drive to improve the Member Experience offered by private clubs throughout the world,” added Fornaro.

“Our *Distinguished Ideas Summit* is not just about being recognized (for a great member experience), but it also recognized the fact that other clubs take on these proven ideas, to enhance their own member experience for their own members. We are working with the most outstanding clubs in the country who want to learn and continually enhance their members’ experience,” Jarrett commented.

And there are plenty of other general managers who agree.

**Frank Cordeiro, COO, Diablo Country Club, Diablo, CA.**

The *Distinguished Clubs* Summit is unlike any other industry event. John Fornaro and the extraordinary DC team should be applauded for conceptualizing



and delivering this one-of-a-kind opportunity to transfer knowledge, and to interact with leaders from the best and most innovative clubs in our industry. I'm grateful for the opportunity to participate and I can't wait for next year!

The *Distinguished Clubs* Summit is always a highlight for the year, but this year's venue, The Union League of Philadelphia, was exceptional in every way. Jeff McFadden and his team at the League have much to be proud of. The hospitality, service and overall culinary experience was world-class and inspiring. A simple thank you and expression of gratitude doesn't properly acknowledge or do justice to the effort and quality we had the privilege of enjoying. We owe you Jeff!

I arrive each year at the Distinguished Club Summit enthused and prepared to learn and share ideas. Without exception, I've come away from each experience inspired and enriched with new and innovative ideas to take back to my club and share with my board and team!

**Kevin Given, GM, Quail Valley Golf Club, Vero Beach, FL**

Excellent and informative speakers and topic matter. It's a great environment to interact with your peers and bounce questions and ideas off one another to gain a better understanding of what is happening in the marketplace.

I thought the in-town and out-of-town host club concept was very well done and thought out – two unique perspec-

tives. Union League was a fantastic host site – The dining options and historical significance of the club was worth the visit. Each team member that I interacted with was informative and very engaging.

I feel that it opens and broadens your perspective on things that are occurring in the industry that you may be isolated from at times but most importantly, I believe that the information being provided is timely to conditions that exist today.

Attendance also allows you to gain a better understanding of what is happening in other parts of the country at clubs with demographic shifts, new innovative ideas that are successful and addressing challenging problems that our clubs are encountering

**Ben Hay, GM, Crane Creek Country Club, Boise, ID**

What a great few days. I felt so privileged to be a part of the group. Thank you for the opportunity and introducing me to some amazing people. I am very excited about the survey and the future for Crane Creek.

**Doug Shifflett, GM, Governors Club, Chapel Hill, NC**

An outstanding Summit. This was one of the best events I have attended. The education, networking, and venue was excellent! It was a great honor to be able to attend. I look forward to next year's event!



**Mike Stanton, GM/COO, San Luis Obispo Country Club, CA**

From the moment I arrived at the Union League until departure I was treated like a member. The Summit format allowed a lot of networking time, with some of the best and brightest in our industry is invaluable, and it's often when we learn the most. Quality time with our peers, especially in an environment like the Union League club is invaluable.

If we can take just one idea back to our club and build a successful program or event our club is better for it. If we come back with more than one great idea...bonus time.

I am a fan of the format of having many different short educations. The quick pace keeps your attention on track and it's always interesting to hear a lot of good ideas and some great ones.

This format keeps participants engaged and provides lots of conversations during networking times. The Union

League was an incredible place to visit and I hope to return one day. The team that Jeff McFadden has built understands hospitality at the deepest level!! When I was looking for the MIs en place dinner I was directed to walk through the kitchen, which I thought strange at first, and then I saw the kitchen...wow!

However, what struck me was that every staff member looked up from whatever they were doing and said good evening with a genuine smile on their face. I couldn't have felt more "at home."

Jeff is the consummate host!! The hospitality he and his team showed us at the Union League was world class. Jeff is also very friendly and approachable and like most of our peers all too happy to share any of the ideas that have worked for him.

John Fornaro (along with Keith Jarrett and the rest of the team) should be congratulated for putting the summit together every year. John's passion for our industry is evi-

## History, Branding and Carving Out a Position



DAVID MACKESEY

**Meaningful differentiation is the key to a healthy brand. Finding it, now that's the hard part. In the consumer marketplace we see how hard it is every day.**

Words are used like "unsurpassed", "new and improved", "99 and 44/100ths percent pure." Pure what?

Differentiation is one of the most difficult of consumer tasks facing any brand. The remarkably good news for the club industry is the fact every club in existence has a built-in opportunity to uniquely differentiate itself as a brand. The who, what, where, when and why of clubs is without exception a story that can be told well. The successes are interesting, the failures, even more interesting.

Another advantage for clubs: much of this differentiation has already happened, so it requires no invested capital, but like anything meaningful, it requires work.

Like many clubs, Diablo Country Club has a rich history, yet, over the years, telling the story has been more myth and legend. While the stories were interesting, much of it was simply inaccurate, and therefore discounted...often dismissed as a mile wide, an inch thick.

This created uncertainty and often, controversy. Which then led to division, confusion and stalemates. Our history was becoming a liability.

At one particular stalemate, the question, "Who designed our golf course?" became a heated debate.

For years, our scorecards celebrated Jack Neville, the gentleman who is credited with the iconic Pebble Beach Golf Links layout, as our designer.

Yet no one could say where this information came from, and not one shred of evidence existed to support the claim. Urban legend? The membership was divided, and rightfully so.

This question deserved a good answer, and that is when the meaningful work began. Over a span of three years, an accurate and in depth research project was undertaken. The only goal: to create an accurate Diablo history.

While the answer of who designed our golf course was one of the last and most difficult mysteries solved, the process uncovered a rich history, relevant positioning, accuracy and ultimately, a meaningful basis for a differentiated brand.

### THE MYSTERY

As it turns out, the mystery of who designed our course was meant to be a secret, a conspiracy. And these are the best kind of stories.

Early in 1916, the formation of the PGA of America was a raging controversy. The current authority, the USGA, was opposed to this union of professionals, and those who supported its formation were punished. A. W. Tillinghast was supportive of the PGA, and quickly stripped of his amateur status by the USGA for violating a newly created rule — designing golf courses in exchange for money.

dent and much appreciated. Tim Muesle and the Philadelphia Cricket Club did an outstanding job hosting our group.

Tim was happy to talk about the PCC and each of his staff members I encountered was also more than happy to help in any way possible.

The summit for me is a can't miss event! It packs a lot into a relatively short time. Again, the exchange of information both in a formal and a non-formal setting is invaluable to us as managers.

To be able to participate in this and do it in a setting like the Union League club as well as the Philadelphia Cricket club is priceless. Can't wait for next year!!

**Burt Ward, GM, Century Country Club, Purchase, NY**

I always pick up new ideas. Sometimes it is stealing an idea from the venues visited. There were a few of those.

**Tom Hurley, GM, Fiddler's Elbow Country Club, NJ**

It's a privilege to be recognized as a *Distinguished Club* and associated with such a great pool of professionals. Being surrounded by such a notable group is a great opportunity to grow and improve. I would attend anything you present in a heartbeat! Terrific job, please pass on my gratitude. I acquired 2-3 ideas and will make good use of them.

**Rob Tench, GM/COO, Orchid Island Golf & Beach Club, Orchid, FL**

I would like to thank you, John and Keith for hosting another great event. The information shared was great and the venue terrific. I look forward to next year's event.

**Jerry Thirion, GM, Bay Colony Golf Club, Naples, FL**

Fantastic performance as usual. Everything you do is over the top and you have us all spoiled. Can't wait until 2017.



Jack Neville, a highly-successful 23-year-old amateur golfer designed the original layout at Diablo, and was supportive of the formation of the PGA. He did not want the same fate as Tillinghast. The conspiracy was formulated to keep Jack's design work at Diablo a closely guarded secret... off the radar of a watchful USGA.

It worked. Jack retained his amateur status, was a member of the victorious 1923 Walker Cup team, and a five time California Amateur Champion. By 1919, the USGA/PGA controversy subsided, and Jack's completed design work at Pebble Beach was widely celebrated.

**WHY IT IS RELEVANT**

The Neville work at Diablo became a celebrated differentiator for the club, yet a number of members still discounted history as simply a nice story on a wall. The answer to the important question, "Why spend all this time on history?" became clearer:

"The Farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see" – Sir Winston Churchill

Our history became one of our most valuable forward planning tools.

Every board is charged with the responsibility of shepherding the club into an unknown future. The range of issues that arise in the boardroom seem endless. A brand position on a foundation of history allows the club to know the difference between things that simply don't change, because they represent what we are, and things that may change, allowing the board to more sharply focus on a narrower range of issues.

**COMMON CLUB UNDERPINNINGS**

1) A sense of place. Every club has this, and by definition, it is unique. The story of why your club's "place" was selected, how it came true, and its ongoing relationship with time and inevitable change is worth telling. As a brand, this story is proprietary and a unique club asset.

2) Leadership to create the club. Without it, the club simply would not have been born. Uncover the process of the club's beginnings, the risks, the naysayers, the obstructionists, then tell the story of how all of this was overcome.

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Hats off to all those who had anything to do with making the summit such a professional and successful event. The highlight of my year!

**Scott Donnie, GM, Fremont Hills Country Club, Los Altos Hills, CA**

Tremendous thanks to you for putting on a great summit. We enjoyed the 2016 *Distinguished Clubs Ideas Summit*.

## DISTINGUISHED CLUB PROGRAM

BoardRoom magazine's *Distinguished Clubs* award program selects the country's finest private clubs that operate at the highest standards, using a club-specific rating system that recognizes the club, its management, and its staff based on a proprietary criteria and evaluation process that distills and measures a club's Member Experience.

The rating system *The Distinguished Club* program uses is different from any that has come before, and with it, the private club industry now has the means to identify the top private clubs based on the most important aspect: Member Experience.

To qualify as a BoardRoom *Distinguished Club*, a club must be nominated by the *Distinguished Clubs'* nomination committee.

"BoardRoom's *Distinguished Clubs* has a well-earned reputation of tremendous credibility from the comprehensive rating system in place for evaluating the Member Experience at clubs across the country," enthused St. Andrews' GM Craig Martin.

"John's passion for providing many new and exciting programs has inspired all of us to raise the bar and improve our facilities and amenities.

"The *Distinguished Clubs* rating system is far and above any other designation/evaluation program currently in place in the club industry. Critical to the evaluation process is the full day on-site visit where Keith Jarrett meets individually with each of our key department heads. At St. Andrews we learn firsthand what we are doing to consistently engage our members and improve their experience every day," Martin explained.

Planning had already started for the *Distinguished Ideas Summit* in 2017. Stay tuned for more details. *Distinguished Ideas Summit* represents an additional benefit for BoardRoom *Distinguished Clubs*...and for sure, another reason to become a *BoardRoom Distinguished Club*. **BR**

3) Staying relevant. Clubs only survive if they have remained relevant over time. Your club exists, therefore relevance exists. Define it, and celebrate it.

4) The best of members. Like all things in the world, club members fall into the standard bell curve, and those on the far

right of the curve love the club, and would do anything to help. Enlist these members into the process, through their efforts, volunteerism, sponsorship and leadership.

5) Perceived value. Clubs exist because of demonstrable value, things like a clubhouse, amenities and land. These assets rightfully employ a great deal of capital, management resources and care.

Brands on the other hand, thrive on perceived value. This requires little capital, but demands the best of the club. Once perceived value is determined to be relevant, accurate and unique to your club, the leverage grows over time. Doing this right once can add generations of value.

## A LIABILITY TO AN ASSET

Over the past five years, the Diablo Country Club's drive towards creating an accurate history resulted in the club carving out a meaningful brand position with relevance for the members, the local community and with both national and international golf communities. While our best work is certainly still ahead of us, having this one in the "done well" column provides clarity and vision for future generations. **BR**

*This article by David Mackesey is based on a presentation at the recent Distinguished Ideas Summit held recently in Philadelphia, PA.*

*David Mackesey is the retired president of one of the world's largest wine companies. He has served as a director of Diablo Country Club in Diablo, CA and as president from 2012-2014. He currently is the club historian for Diablo Country Club and the overseas historian for the Carnoustie Golf Club. Mackesey and fellow president Hank Salvo, with overlapping terms, were also selected BoardRoom's Distinguished Club Presidents for 2015.*



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