

Once Exclusive, Now Inclusive

Written by Mark Sell
October 2009

The Miami Shores Country Club throws open its doors to one and all



This month the Miami Shores Country Club will celebrate its 70th birthday by opening its doors to the general public. That means friendly people on good behavior will be welcome, whether Shores residents or not. The club will still have golf and tennis memberships, which entitle members to price discounts and other perks. The so-called social-membership program will also continue for those who don't play either sport.

But now virtually anyone can walk through the front doors at 10000 Biscayne Blvd. for a drink, a meal, some music, or just some people-watching. No membership required. By "virtually," the club means everyone who adheres to the "casually elegant" dress code: no flip-flops, tank tops, T-shirts, jeans, or shorts. This, after all, is a country club where a certain decorum is still expected amid the Georgian columns, silken wallpaper, and heavy drapes.

However, old walls both real and imagined are tumbling. "We should have done this years ago," says Alberto Pozzi, the club's general manager since 1991. "There are a lot of people who never set foot in here, and that includes Miami Shores residents."

Pozzi is the tall, 55-year-old, worldly Uruguayan-born fellow with the trademark handlebar mustache you see at the club six days a week, year in and year out. "We are extremely excited at the changes that are taking place," he says. "We look at this as a tremendous opportunity to reposition the facility to reflect the needs of the community."

Economics, of course, compels the change. The old model no longer works. For one thing, tennis and golf have been in national decline. Florida golf courses were closing during the 2001-2006 real-estate bubble to make way for developers who never developed. Just up the street, the Williams Island golf course is overgrown with weeds rather than 825 townhouses. Recent South Florida golf course casualties are legion: California Club, Presidential, Fontainebleau, Miramar, and Raintree are just part of the list.

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The Miami Shores Country Club is not likely to become yet another casualty, but it has dropped below break-even, with about \$3.5 million in revenue this year, down from \$3.8 million two years ago. “For us to start to breathe easy, we need to be in the \$3.6 to \$3.7-million range,” says Pozzi, responsible for a staff of 75 who try to keep greens and facilities pristine on a tight budget. “This is not a last-ditch move by any means, but it’s time to do something.”

The country club and Village of Miami Shores operate as an economically intertwined public-private partnership, and always have. The village owns the country club’s 110 acres and leases the land to the club. Under the current 25-year lease, which expires in 2025, the club, run by Professional Course Management (Pozzi’s employer), pays the village \$25,000 a year for the first \$3.6 million in revenue, another \$50,000 for the first \$100,000 above \$3.6 million, and another \$25,000 for every \$100,000 above that. When the club took in some \$3.8 million two years ago, the village got \$100,000. This year the village will get only \$25,000. So the club’s success is very much in the village’s interest.

At its September 1 meeting, the Miami Shores Village Council gave the club its unanimous blessing to open the doors. The seven-member country club advisory board, weighted with baby boomers in their 50s and early 60s, saw no other way. “The bar and dining room are underutilized, and that’s the fourth leg of the table needed to make the club successful -- along with golf, tennis, and banquets,” said board member Jesse Walters, age 53. “Members still can keep any status or bragging rights, so keeping social memberships seemed a good compromise.”

Added 58-year-old board member Bob Swan: “This place is a diamond in the rough. It has one of the most beautiful bars in Miami. It has great golf, great tennis. A lot of people didn’t feel they were welcome. They *are* welcome.”

Historically, not everyone has been welcome at the Miami Shores Country Club. From its opening in November 1939 through the 1950s, membership was capped and restricted to property owners in Miami Shores. Two generations ago, deed restrictions on residences prohibited African Americans and Jews from owning property in the Shores, and thus they were also banned from membership at the country club. Perceptions of prejudice and exclusivity ran deep, though that world changed long ago. Today Miami Shores is just 48 percent non-Hispanic white, 25 percent black, and 22 percent Hispanic.

By the late 1970s, social patterns had shifted. Doctors and bankers, faced with the demands of

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the marketplace, stopped knocking off for Wednesday afternoon golf and martinis. When women entered the labor force in great numbers, the ranks of bridge tables and Welcome Wagons were decimated. Day-long Saturday golf sessions with the guys or gals fell prey to soccer and baseball duty, and the retirees who once migrated to Miami shifted to Broward, Palm Beach, Stuart, Vero Beach, and the West Coast.

When Pozzi arrived in 1991, the Old Guard was still very much present, though somewhat fearful of West Indian immigration roiling North Dade (including Miami Shores), flat-lined or declining property values, and lingering memories of the 1980 McDuffie riots. Jackets and ties were still required for Sunday brunch. Pozzi remembers catching hell for trying to loosen that restriction on a hot June day.

As a 50-year member of the club,Carolyn Cadwalader has been through it all, and she confesses mixed feelings about the recently announced changes. She'd prefer at least a token required membership, but on balance she welcomes them. "Some of our groups have been priced out of the club," she says. "Who can pay for \$50 dinners with the 7-percent tax and 20-percent gratuity? But they are making improvements, with better food, better menus, and HDTVs for sports. The jazz nights are very nice, with wine tastings and very nice hors d'oeuvres. And I'd love to see more of the crowd in their 40s and 50s. Did you see that *Biscayne Times* article on the Dancemasters dance studio? Why not have more dance nights starting with a half-hour lesson? I'll bet the community would love that."

Cadwalader could be right, given the recent popularity of competitive dancing. But while Alberto Pozzi and others ponder that option, visitors without memberships will soon learn that club parking is free, with valets only emerging for Fridays, Sunday brunches, and certain special occasions.

Prices and offerings have changed to accommodate both the Great Recession and the Upper Eastside's evolving human kaleidoscope. That means anyone can now enjoy a \$4 Skyy vodka martini or \$3 Heineken from the great oval bar overlooking the driving range during the daily 4:00-7:00 p.m. happy hour. For the Friday-night jazz sessions in the dining room (7:00-10:00 p.m.), you can order the \$14 pan-roasted Asian salmon or the \$9 churrasco wrap. Lunch runs Tuesday-Sunday, with all items under \$10. The popular Sunday brunch (11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., reservations required) costs \$18, and is free for kids under 12.

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As for golf, the club's mainstay, it has been open to the public for 20 years, a round with cart costing \$60. But through October 31, any South Florida duffer can get an even better deal: \$35 for a round, a cart, a bucket of balls, lunch, and two-for-one drinks.

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