

In It for the Long Run

BallenIsles CC's \$26 million, state-of-the-art Sports Complex now stands as its new permanent monument to a commitment to healthy member lifestyles.

By Joanna DeChellis, Managing Editor

What do Venus and Serena Williams and the Senior PGA Tour's major success story, Bruce Fleisher, have in common? Several times a week, they lace up their sneakers and pull on their gym shorts to break a sweat in the brand new \$26 million Sports Complex (see photo below) at BallenIsles Country Club in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

Not all that long ago, BallenIsles CC offered its 1,350 members—including the Williams sisters and Fleisher, among others—an already impressive set of amenities that included a 72,000-sq. ft. clubhouse with both casual and formal dining rooms, three championship golf courses, tennis courts, a small fitness room, and a pool facility.

But when the club transitioned from

developer- to member-owned in 2005, it became apparent that much of the physical plant needed improvements.

"The club's facilities weren't the primary priority for the developer, and they simply weren't built to serve the long-term needs of a large and growing membership," explains Derrick Barnett, General Manager, who came to the club nearly two years ago when Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Troon Golf was contracted to manage operations. "In order to attract future generations and be relevant to current members, the facilities needed to be significantly improved."

BallenIsles first conducted a comprehensive survey to pinpoint the club's needs as perceived by its membership. Then, a facilities planning committee developed a master facili-

Fitness Profile

Club Name & Location:

BallenIsles Country Club;

Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

Founded: **1963**

Total Membership: **1,350**

Sports Complex Established:

December 2009

Sports Complex Size:

62,000 sq. ft.

Features: **5,500-sq. ft. fitness**

facility; 8,000-sq. ft. spa/salon; 22

tennis courts (19 Har-Tru clay courts,

2 hard courts, one stadium tennis

court); tennis shop, and Bistro 105

Fitness Equipment:

2 Stairmasters, 11 Life Fitness tread-

mills, 5 True treadmills, 2 Arc Train-

ers, 3 True ellipticals, 3 AMT 100i

Precor ellipticals, 6 Precor EFX 576i

ellipticals, 2 Sci-fit arm bikes, 2 Life

Fitness upright bikes (Elevation Se-

ries); 7 recumbent Life Fitness bikes

(Elevation Series), 1 rowing machine,

1 Expresso Upright bike, 1 E-Spinner,

1 True stretch cage, 1 Precor stretch

chair, 3 Technogym Kinesis One

units, 8 stretch tables, 1 Freemotion

cable cross, 1 Freemotion chest, 1

Freemotion mini, and Life Fitness'

Signature Line of strength

equipment

Fitness Staff: 1 sports complex

director, 1 fitness manager,

10 trainers, 4 fitness floor staff

PHOTO COURTESY OF BALLENISLES CC



The new 62,000-sq. ft. Sports Complex features a state-of-the-art fitness area, aerobics room, private massage rooms, an inviting pool and cabana, as well as 22 tennis courts and convenient dining facilities.

ties plan, based on the survey results, that would include a modern new Sports Complex with an additional dining venue, major improvements to the main clubhouse, and a renovation to the East Golf Course.

“This was a pivotal step for BallenIsles CC,” says Michelle Doherty, Director of Fitness & Spa Operations, who also came to BallenIsles two years ago from The Ritz-Carlton Company. “For the first time in its 42-year history, members had total control over strategic planning.”

To execute all three parts of the facilities improvement plan, the club issued a \$95 monthly capital assessment to all members, plus an additional \$40 for full golf members and \$27 for sports members.

Once the club established the financing, the facilities committee was charged with developing a

plan to improve what was then called the Courtside Building (it housed the previous fitness facilities and was small, dated, moldy and not up to current hurricane codes).

“Fitness has always been an intrinsic part of the culture here,” says Doherty. “The program before was sound, but it was truly limited by the shortcomings of the building.”

At first, BallenIsles considered a renovation, but the scope of the project soon escalated to the point where the cost became almost the same as for a new building. As a result, the committee decided to move forward with an entirely new building that would be dedicated to health and wellness, and called the Sports Complex.

The footprint of the new building would occupy three existing tennis courts, so additional courts

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were added at the beginning of the project, to minimize disruption to the tennis program. The existing fitness center remained operational throughout the entire period of construction as well.

Once the new building was complete, the old building was removed and the pool and deck were improved and expanded.

Fitness Comes First

Opened in December 2009, BallenIsles' Sports Complex (see photos, above) provides a fresh and distinctive environment for fitness and spa activities. With its own locker rooms, meeting spaces and dedicated bistro-style dining venue, it is a valuable counterpoint to the more traditional experience of the main clubhouse.

"The Sports Complex is a key component of our marketing program, too," says Doherty. "It has given the club a significant competitive advantage in the local marketplace."

Occupying the bulk of the second floor, the fitness center is roughly 5,500 square feet. A long open space, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the pool area, is filled with dozens of pieces of strength and cardio equipment (see full list, pg. 37). There are also dedicated rooms for Pilates, spinning and aerobics, as well as a kinesis wall that allows for seamless movement between hundreds of exercise variations for both physical therapy and functional training (see photos with the online version of this article, at www.clubandresortbusiness.com).

According to Doherty, the fitness programming is a constant work in progress and continues to be modified and enhanced every month, to focus on the needs and wants of members while introducing industry trends and new group offerings.

"We offer personal training, sports-specific training, group exercise programs, and kids' programs," says Doherty. "We even offer a dedicated 'Men's Fitness Class' focused entirely on strength, cardiovascular conditioning and flexibility, with none of the 'dance choreography' associated with many regular aerobic classes. It's been really popular."

There are also extensive yoga classes that include Ashtanga, Iyengar and Vinyasa Flow Yoga, and a water program geared to members challenged by joint problems, or pre-/post-surgery patients.

"The goal was to truly be all things health and wellness to our members," explains Barnett, who notes that the club also offers physical therapy

services as well as injury-prevention classes. "A lot of our members held memberships at other gyms. Now they are giving those memberships up, as we are able to offer everything they need right here."

Fab Food with a Side of Spa

When members enter the Sports Complex, a large, well-lit lobby with casually arranged furniture groupings welcomes them. The fitness components are upstairs, while the spa and salon are to the left and Bistro 105, a casually elegant restaurant with indoor and outdoor dining, is to the right.

"Bistro 105 is a perfect counterpoint to the more traditional dining options offered in the main clubhouse," explains Barnett. "It is a very modern interpretation of a country club dining venue, featuring booth seating, contemporary artwork, an open kitchen and a brick oven for wood-fired pizzas."

The level of finish and detail in the interior, along with a wide variety of menu options, appeals to the club's vast membership.

"One of the things we learned during the survey process was that members were looking for another dining outlet that was part-bar, part-lounge," says Barnett. "Bistro 105 responds to those wants with its large, swanky bar space, and roomy booths and tables [see photo, top right]."

On a menu that falls between casual and upscale, a number of healthful menu items are peppered in, to underscore the building's health and wellness philosophy. Creative salads, seafood options, egg-white omelets, whole grains, vegetarian choices and half-portions are among the items finding great favor with members, according to Mary Henderson, Director of Club Marketing.

"Interest in instructor-led group classes continues to grow."

—Michelle Doherty,
Director of Fitness &
Spa Operations



Although restricted to members and their guests, BallenIsles' facilities have a distinguished history as the choice of many professional athletes, for both practice and competition.

PHOTOS (ABOVE) BY JOANNA DECHELLIS, C&RB MANAGING EDITOR; (TOP RIGHT) COURTESY OF BALLENISLES CC



BallenIsles CC's General Manager, Derrick Barnett (left), and Director of Fitness & Spa Operations, Michelle Doherty, are focused on getting the word out about the new fitness center, bistro and spa (above).



"By offering healthful items alongside heartier favorites such as burgers and brick-oven pizzas, the menu appeals to all types of diners," she says. "The goal here is to be as inclusive as possible."

Opposite Bistro 105 on the first floor of the Sports Complex is a full-service spa, with a hair and nail salon, relaxation lounges (see photo, left), private massage rooms, saunas, steam rooms, and locker rooms.

But because the spa concept is still very new to BallenIsles, the club decided to bring in a well-established salon and spa brand from West Palm Beach to run the operation. In doing so, the club now derives rental income from the space.

"A strategic decision was made to partner with a recognized brand name with a significant profile and presence in the local market," says Doherty. "This has proved to be a sound decision. The name recognition created an immediate comfort level among the members for all spa and salon services, including hair care, that otherwise could have taken significant time to build."

Happy Beginnings

Just nine months after first opening its doors, BallenIsles' Sports Complex now sees, on average, about 50% of the membership using it between three and seven days a week, reports Doherty.

"Communication has been key, both before and after opening," she adds. "Keeping members informed on issues such as traffic routing, heavy equipment coming on-site, safety warnings and operational modifications builds tremendous confidence in the competence of the professional team."

Throughout the building stage, BallenIsles communicated with members through an e-mail newsletter, "Building on Success," which updated construction progress. A photo gallery—"Seeing is Believing"—catalogued photos of site work, aerial shots and interiors.

"Members appreciate knowing what is happening and how we're moving forward," notes Henderson. "By bringing them into the conversation, they are able to more actively participate in the club and in the decision-making process." **C&RB**

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