



# LEARN FROM A REBORN CLUB

**After a change in ownership, the Circle C Tennis Club in Texas was forced to revamp how it operated. Here's how the facility achieved success.**

BY FERNANDO M. VELASCO

**B**ack in 2000, my wife and I decided to move to Austin, Texas, where our four children and three grandchildren were living. At that time, I was employed in a well-paid position at a country club in Boca Raton, Fla., but we wanted to be closer to our family.

Thanks to the referral of a friend, I was offered a teaching position at the Circle C Tennis Club in Austin. In addition to teaching tennis, I also helped at the front desk and assisted with some administrative duties. A year later, when the club manager decided to leave to build his own tennis club, I was asked to take over the duties of general manager and director of tennis.

The developer of Circle C Ranch and its surrounding areas was happy to have the tennis club as an added amenity to his development. Since the area was growing rapidly and the homes were selling with success, he assured me that he would cover all deficits the club might incur. In the first six months of operation, the club had a net loss of \$66,000; in 2002, the loss was \$81,000; in 2003, \$93,000; in 2004, \$73,000, and in 2005, \$32,000. True to his word, the developer covered all shortfalls. But in September 2005, the developer filed for bankruptcy and we were left on our own.

A new developer bought the property and gave me the reins to run the club with the understanding that he would offer no financial help. I had a great staff, programs were strong, and membership was growing. I was determined to keep the club from going under. In 2006 we had a minimal loss of \$132, and in 2007, we turned the corner with a positive net income of \$16,000.

How did we do it? Here are a few tips that may help you to promote your club and make it financially stable:

### 1. Have Faith and Trust

I believe that everything in life happens for a purpose. When we arrived in Austin, we had the benefit of being close to our family during times of crisis, including a family separation, death of two step-grandchildren and one of our daughters being diagnosed with cancer. We could not have dealt with those issues as effectively from a distance.

### 2. Surround Yourself With Good Staff

We were blessed with an incredible, professional and trustworthy staff—from our business manager to tennis pros, front desk staff and child care staff, all of which treat the club as their family. We listened to their experiences and allowed them to operate the club and their programs with much TLC. They developed their programs to fit the needs of all ages and abilities of children and adults.

### 3. Communicate With Staff

A key to our growth has been the constant communication between the staff and me. I made an effort to keep all employees informed of our club's status. Many times some of us had to wait to get paid until funds were available to cover our checks. They all had the same faith and trust that one day the club would be a successful one.

### 4. Expand Programming

All efforts were made to continue offering programs that were well-attended, and we encouraged the creation of new programs

to build membership. As a result, our clinics and lessons were well-supported by members, even on the coldest or hottest days. Originally we had only two member categories: Family and Singles. We added four more—Senior Family, Senior Single, Junior Executive and Junior Players—and in the process created a new market of players and club members.

## 5. Go After Beginners

We took advantage of the TIA's co-op funding to promote beginner lessons. At first, I was skeptical about starting a beginner program. But I decided to take a chance and I personally gave every one of the lessons in which for \$60 (now we charge \$75) beginners received six one-hour group sessions. Also, during that time, they could use the demos, ball machine, the club, and child care.

The first year, I taught more than 130 players, of which 33 families joined the club. The second year, I taught 180 players and 55 families joined. They not only took the lessons and bought racquets, shoes and clothes, but they also brought their spouses and children to the programs. And our leagues grew from six to 15.

## 6. Believe in Yourself

Within a few years our membership grew from 40 to 178. But it was time to take chances. Previously, we never charged initiation fees when players joined. A player only needed to join on a monthly basis and they could leave the club at any time.

In March 2006, I sent a letter to members indicating that if they wished to continue playing at the club, they needed to re-join by paying a one-time non-refundable "initiation fee" in addition to their monthly dues. Our goal was to generate \$31,000 to resurface eight courts, replace windscreens and paint light poles.

We gave members 15 days to respond, and by the 16th day, we had received commitments for \$32,000 worth of initiation fees. We lost only eight members in the process. All projects were completed by June and the club looked fantastic and had become something staff and members alike were proud of.

## 7. Listen to Your Members

Once the courts were completed, several members questioned why we did not charge a higher initiation fee originally, which would have generated enough money to include blacktopping the parking lot. I sent another letter to members, asking for a "voluntary donation" to cover the cost of this project. Our goal was to raise \$32,000 and after 20 days, we received commitments for \$20,000.

To make up the difference, I approached vendors, sponsors, real-estate agents, restaurants, car dealers and other local busi-

nesses for a donation in exchange for an advertisement in the form of a banner that would be displayed at our club for a year. They were also promised an advertisement spot on our website. We raised an additional \$15,000 to cover the project.

## 8. Write Your Business Plan

All of these would not have been possible without writing and following a business plan. This plan had "back-up" options in the event the original plan was not successful. I wrote four phases to complete these projects and once each plan was finished, I revised the next plan. So far, we've completed the first three phases and are into our fourth phase.

One of the areas that needed improvement was our visibility with prospective members and players. We redesigned our website, improved our newsletter coverage and communicated almost weekly via emails, reminding members of tournaments, complimentary Cardio Tennis clinics and special events. Our website grew from 13,300 hits in 2005, to 19,008 in 2007.

## 9. Believe in Your Club

Once all projects were completed, phase three included raising initiation fees in conjunction with raising monthly dues. We haven't had any problem bringing in new members with the new fees nor have members left because of the dues increase. They trusted us with their investment and we have fulfilled their trust and faith in us.

## 10. Keep Looking Ahead

Good managers and directors of tennis need to look at the past, present and future of their club. One must stay focused on the daily needs of each member while continuing to look for ways to improve in all areas, whether it is improving staff, programs, facility, merchandising, or simply keeping the club safe, healthy and clean.

In short, follow your instinct, have faith and keep tennis growing by being an active promoter of the game and your facility. ▶

### Stay True to Your Mission

At Circle C Tennis Club, we truly believe in and follow our mission statement, which is posted in the club and published in our newsletter each year. Our goal is to follow it every day when we come to work. If you don't have an actual mission statement for your facility, gather your staff and trusted members and put one together.

### Circle C Tennis Club Mission Statement

- ▶ To retain the present membership and attract new members to join Circle C Tennis Club.
- ▶ To provide members with a complete tennis program. To meet their needs ranging from beginner level to advanced tournament level.
- ▶ To develop a junior tournament program that attracts the best junior players.
- ▶ To maintain the tennis facilities in the best conditions possible.
- ▶ To prevent possible injuries to both members and staff caused by carelessness.
- ▶ To meet budget goals.
- ▶ To offer friendly and sincere service.



*Fernando Velasco is the general manager and director of tennis at the Circle C Tennis Club in Austin, Texas. A USPTA Master Professional since 1984, he was the first recipient of the USPTA National "Pro of the Year" Award in 1976. He is also a Master PTR Professional. There are only seven tennis pros in the world who have been recognized by both the USPTA and PTR as Master Pros. A member of the Wilson Premiere Advisory Staff, Velasco has been ranked in the National USPTA, PTR, and the USTA in the different age divisions since 1970.*