



Ferncroft

– Family-Friendly Country Club

by **TERI
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There was a time when men like Ozzie Nelson were up and out early on Saturday morning to play golf for most of the day. Later, when they got home, a nap was usually in order – and Harriet Nelson never seemed to mind. But times have changed, and so has the typical American family. With Mom working just as many hours as Dad, and kids involved in so many after-school activities, spending quality time as a family has become something that requires clever scheduling.

This is exactly what went through Damon DeVito's mind when he decided to purchase the Fernwood Country Club in Middleton. A father of three school-aged children, DeVito knows how chaotic life can be and understands how important it is to spend fun time with his kids as well as quiet time with his wife. Yet there are just so many hours in a week.

"When I first looked at Ferncroft, I immediately saw a lot of possibilities. And then when I met some of the members, I knew that a family-

oriented country club is just what the area needs. This isn't just about Dad playing golf. There's something for everyone here," DeVito said.

When DeVito, managing director of Affinity Management in Virginia, bought the 257-acre property, the 18-hole championship golf course, which hosted an annual LPGA event, was in good shape. However, the swimming pool needed renovating. And the restaurant had been closed, its equipment stripped and sold off; and large sections of the facility were underused. DeVito took over the club in February 2006 and began transforming it into a warm, comfortable place where golfers and non-golfers can spend the entire day with their families.

This year members were delighted to see eight new tennis courts, a completely refurbished seven-hole, par-three executive course, a chipping green, and a driving range. >>



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A new fitness center has been added, as well as a pool-side snack bar that serves cocktails. DeVito has also made it easy for parents to keep an eye on the little ones while getting some sun themselves: He built a huge sandbox, complete with trucks and other play-things, that can be seen from the pool area.

The club restaurant, The 19th Hole, reopened, under a new chef, Stephane Baloy, whose résumé includes the Charles Hotel in Cambridge and Le Méridien Hotel in Boston. "Getting Stephane was a real coup. His food is fantastic, and he's the kind of chef that greets members personally. He's very involved," said Craig Berkel, director of membership.

Toby Ahern, director of golf, has worked at the country club for 16 years and has seen several owners come and go. DeVito's ideas were just what the doctor ordered, Ahern says, and membership pride has made a big comeback. "Golf is a different industry today. Young working people don't have a lot of time to play golf and spend time with their family. Here everyone gets to do something fun all at the same place," he said.

Though avid golfers still make up the core of the membership, more than 100 new social memberships have recently been added. When it comes to getting families involved, DeVito is never at a loss for how to keep them happy. The club hosts a kids' movie night that's gone over big. While Mom and Dad have a quiet dinner at the 19th Hole, kids, with supervision, are treated to a movie. There's also a Sunday brunch and a themed family poolside barbecue on Tuesday night. An autumn hayride and, for later on, a breakfast with Santa are already in the works.

Berkel said the club has experienced a complete turnaround, and new plans have been very well received. "I tell people we're a one-stop family entertainment complex," he said.

In addition to putting smiles on lots of local faces with the new and improved country club, DeVito plans to give something back to the community. "Every year we plan to 'adopt' five to 10 kids by giving them a free membership, instruction, and transportation. Holding a clinic is nice, but it's just one day. I'd like to be able to create an opportunity for kids to learn golf or tennis."

The Ferncroft is open year-round so member friendships aren't just seasonal. Currently there's no waiting list to join, but if DeVito's new concept catches on as planned, who knows? ■