

The Man with the P-L-A-N: Robert H. Dedman and ClubCorp

by Robert H. Bosselman, Ph.D.

Humble Beginning

Robert H. Dedman was born into a hardscrabble family in south central Arkansas in 1926. His father was a salesman, and the family moved often in search of work. These moves were primarily in Arkansas, and the Dallas area, where relatives lived. Among the challenges associated with moving so much was that Robert constantly had to make new friends and adjust to new schools. As the oldest child of the family, Robert was no stranger to work. As Robert noted many times, they never thought of themselves as poor. In fact, he credits his parents with instilling in him the values of hard work and self-reliance. One of his favorite axioms from his parents was that the best place to find a helping hand was at the end of your own arm. It was this early upbringing that created a desire within Robert to succeed and move beyond the cotton fields of south central Arkansas.

An early move brought the family to the Dallas area when Robert was ten. Of note was his job

as a paperboy, and one of his customers was the Melrose Hotel, a grand opulent property of its time, and like grand hotels of its era, a place to be and be seen. Robert identified this influence as part of his reason for wanting to be a mover and shaker, and a part of that world of grand living. This work opportunity contrasted with picking berries and cotton back in Arkansas.



Robert often noted that he and legendary coach Bear Bryant hailed from the same area of Arkansas, and that both he and the coach often cited this rural upbringing with stimulating their motivation to get beyond those cotton fields. It was the hard times of Arkansas that initiated Robert's transition from youth to manhood, and set the stage for him to develop the ideas that brought about ClubCorp.

In 1940, hard times in Arkansas forced his parents to send Robert and his brother to live with their widowed aunt in Dallas. At the age of fourteen, Robert began the ninth grade at North Dallas High School. Always a good student, Robert was now exposed to a

wider perspective of educational opportunity. One of Robert's hallmarks was his ability to recite poetry from a variety of sources, including his own compositions. He credits his English teacher, Ms. Bertrand, with inciting this passion for words. He has noted how he felt inspired by reading Emerson, Longfellow, Browning, and particularly Rudyard Kipling. The poem "If" by Kipling, became Robert's favorite, and provided him support for his positive attitude and desire to do good for others. In high school Robert also began to participate in debate, and soon he was competing on a national level. He blossomed in high school, serving as editor of the yearbook and school paper, receiving numerous awards for debate, as well as participating in baseball and tennis.

By the time he turned eighteen, Robert had devised his life goal; to make fifty million dollars by age fifty, and then give to charity one million dollars annually. Not only did Robert have this goal, but also he had his plan of work to accomplish the goal. In Kipling's poem, "If," there was the phrase, "the unforgiving minute," which Robert interpreted as time management. He calculated that with 168 hours in a week, and subtracting 56 for sleep, he still had 112 hours to use for his own purposes. He decided to work eighty hours a week from age twenty to thirty-five; sixty hours a week from thirty-five to fifty; forty hours a week from fifty to sixty-five; and finally twenty hours a week until he decided that

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“One of his favorite axioms from his parents was that the best place to find a helping hand was at the end of your own arm.”

was enough. Robert had devised his game plan for achieving his life goal, and he even broke it down into weekly components. When asked why he put so much time into work, he replied he was actually having fun. He believed that life was meant to be lived to the fullest, and if you enjoy what you are doing you will feel good about yourself and what activities you engage in each and every day.

Opportunity Knocks

Before he graduated from high school, Robert signed on to join the Naval Air Corps. Although he had athletic and academic scholarships waiting, Robert reported for active duty on June 1, 1944. He wanted to join the Naval Air Corps because of its intense training. By late summer of 1944, the Navy had determined it did not need as many pilots as previously thought, and Robert was selected to attend what is now known as the University of Texas at Arlington. In just one year, Robert earned sixty credits and a junior college degree in engineering. The Navy was impressed with his abilities, and sent him to the University of Texas at Austin, as part of their officer's training program. In his time there he earned a bachelor's degree in economics, as well as completing a pre-law curriculum. In 1946 he entered law school at the University of Texas at Austin. He was released from active duty while in law school, but remained in the naval reserves as a Lieuten-

ant J-G. Robert was not your typical college student. All the time he was in college, he was also able to hold jobs in real estate and insurance. He credited his ability to study while housesitting on weekends as his key to getting through law school.

In 1949 Robert opened his own law firm with two partners. While building his law practice, he found time to attend Southern Methodist University and earn a master's degree in law. One of the firm's clients was H.L. Hunt, scion of the now famous oil family. With his engineering background, Robert referred to himself as a law-gineer, and was comfortable in the industrial environment of the oil industry. It was in that rough-and-tumble world of oil wildcatting that Robert was able to demonstrate his astute knowledge of law and endear himself to Mr. Hunt. Soon he found himself handling the majority of Mr. Hunt's business. From his association with Mr. Hunt, he learned more about planning and risk-taking, and was able to build upon his own skill set. While successful by any measure, Robert was still searching for the right combination to push his life goal into action. By chance he was sent to Rancho Mirage in California, and was invited to play golf at Thunderbird Country Club. He discovered that the raw land of the club had been purchased for \$2,000 an acre and then sold as quarter-acre home lots for \$50,000 each. He quickly recognized the value of offering homeowner's amenities of golf, tennis, swimming, a clubhouse and beautiful landscaping. People could enjoy an estate lifestyle while paying a modest amount of dues, and there was a sense of belonging that appealed to people.

While the club industry had been vibrant prior to the 1930's, years of economic depression and World War II had severely impacted clubs. From 1930 to 1957, when Robert made that fateful trip to California, more clubs closed than opened. By 1957 however, the American economy was back in full swing, and the population was booming. Robert discovered that a 1,100-acre piece of property on the outskirts of Dallas had just passed from an estate to a local real estate

developer. There were no homes anywhere near this property since, as Robert noted, this land was on the other side of nowhere. Robert negotiated to buy forty acres on which to build a clubhouse, and then leased another large piece of the property for what would become Brookhaven Country Club. What Robert did that distinguished Brookhaven was to build fifty-four holes of golf around a single clubhouse. Essentially this 'three-in-one' concept allowed for economy of scale and an ability to maximize a modest investment. The original initiation fee for a family membership was \$280, and compared quite favorably to the Dallas Country Club, which was \$10,000 at that time. Robert also offered initial life memberships for \$1,000. Monthly dues were \$12.80. He had over one million dollars in the bank before he broke ground. The other, and more significant distinguishing characteristic that Robert employed at Brookhaven was in the membership. Robert's philosophy focused on letting people in, not keeping them out. While there are many fine clubs that limit membership, Robert's approach was clearly different at the time. On November 11, 1957, Robert H. Dedman incorporated Country Clubs, Inc., the forerunner of what today we know as ClubCorp International.

The P-L-A-N

When Robert would give a speech, he used a single chair as a prop. While many thought the chair was there for him to sit, it actually provided a visual representation of his four key principles. Each leg of the chair was designated: the “P” stands for planning, the “L” for learning, the “A” for positive mental attitude, and the “N” for be nice. When Robert would discuss planning, he would talk of it as the prelude to balance in one’s life. This concept of balance was very important to Robert. As noted previously, he focused on getting the most out of every minute. He would tell his audience that in order to have balance, you have to plan, and that to plan, your life must have balance. He strongly believed each of us was capable of having it all. While Robert noted that it was possible to be a success without a college education, he also felt that it was harder to make and keep a fortune without a college degree. He always stated that education begins with listening, and leadership begins with learning. Robert would often comment that it was nice to be smart, but more important to be educated in many ways. In conversations with students, Robert would tell them to learn all they could about judgment, and to practice common sense in that process. He was a strong proponent of the values persistence and perseverance. He often reminded students that his debating skills were honed by participating in debates nearly every weekend during high school. Robert’s theory was that the more you learn, the more you earn, and the more you learn, the more you live.

A positive mental attitude, according to Robert, was the most

important characteristic one can give their child. He noted we are all born with genetic characteristics, but attitudes and behaviors are developed over time. Therefore it was a parent’s responsibility to create that positive environment for the child. He recalled his parents, particularly his mother, as constantly providing each child with positive reinforcement. He noted that he had the will to be happy and a desire to succeed. Robert incorporated this value of positive mental attitude into the operation of each club. Each team member addresses a member partner by name every time they can, since this makes anyone feel special. Robert was well known for telling jokes, and in humor, he tells others how not to take oneself so seriously. While it was important to take your responsibilities seriously, Robert felt that one would become too tense and intense and lose the ability to see problems in perspective. You would also lose that positive mental attitude that was necessary to find solutions to problems. Being nice to others was easy, Robert noted, when one thought before opening one’s mouth. A sign on his desk read, ‘keep your words nice and sweet, just in case you have to eat them.’ He believed the world was full of nice people, but that we just don’t hear about them enough. Robert suggested that being nice was how we touched other people in a positive way. He described himself as a cheerleader for ClubCorp, meaning that he communicated his vision for ClubCorp and made sure his team partners had all the resources necessary to accomplish the vision. In fact, he did not even describe himself as being in the club business; he was in the people-building business.

Many years ago, Robert wrote a poem entitled, “A Club,” which can now be found in every ClubCorp property as well as in other clubs. It serves to summarize his philosophy.

A Club

A club is a haven of refuge and accord in a world torn by strife and discord.

A club is a place where kindred spirits gather to have fun and make friends.

A club is a place of courtesy, good breeding, and good manners.

A club is a place expressly for camaraderie, merriment, good will, and good cheer. It humbles the mighty, draws out the timid, and casts out the sorehead.

And a club is one of the noblest inventions of mankind.

The Art of Giving

True to his word, and then some, Robert gave away much of his fortune during his lifetime. As he so nicely stated, “they don’t put luggage racks on hearses.” At the time of his passing in August 2002, the Robert H. and Nancy Dedman Foundation had given away significant gifts to numerous charitable organizations. Primary among these was Southern Methodist University, where the College of Liberal Arts and the Life Sciences Building bear the Dedman name. In Dallas, they also provided funds for what is today known as the Dedman Medical Center and RHD Hospital. At the University of Texas at Austin, the top one percent of the student body receives Dedman Scholarships, and are known as Dedman Merit Scholars. Four top students from North Dallas High School each year receive scholarships that pay their tuition at Southern Methodist University. Since the population of North Dallas High School has changed significantly since Robert Dedman attended in the 1940’s, these scholarships have resulted in minority students receiving the scholarships.

At the University of North Texas, funds provided for a professorship in club management. Jerry Dickinson, former ClubCorp executive and recognized leader in the field of club management, has held that position since its inception. At Florida State University, the Dedman Foundation provided funds for the building of the University Center complex, which today houses the Dedman School of Hospitality. In addition, funds were provided for operations within the School, including professorships and an

Executive-in-Residence. Jim Riscigno, another former ClubCorp executive and recognized leader in club management, has held the latter position since its inception. Of significance at Florida State University was the partnership of ClubCorp and the university. The University Center Club, a ClubCorp property, operates within the University Center complex, and partners with the Dedman School of Hospitality. This unique situation of a private club operating on a public university campus in partnership with an academic program has provided numerous benefits to students. Robert explained his interest in giving to education as wanting to invest in forever. For those of us in education, we can appreciate the genius of the man and his appreciation of the value of education. The second point he made about giving was that it created heaven on earth for him; that in giving he became even richer in life.

Everyone is a Partner

The partnership culture created by Robert Dedman has been instituted in ClubCorp's message of "Pride in Belonging." The company motto has long been "the best serving the best." Each partner has a passion for exceeding member expectations, and this approach focuses on three Steps of Service: Warm Welcome, Magic Moments, and Fond Farewell. Each club seeks to be a haven of refuge and a home away from home for the care and comfort of its member partners. By listening to, learning from, and serving these member partner expectations, ClubCorp continues to be recognized as a company of the highest integrity. More than anything else, ClubCorp operates according to a set of principles laid out by Robert, and affectionately referred to as Robert's Rules of Order. These ten rules illustrate succinctly everything that Robert H. Dedman was, and that ClubCorp remains today.

Robert's Rules of Order

Rule #1

A sense of balance must apply to all areas of your life, not just your livelihood.

Rule #2

It's so important in life to have a life plan. Planning is a prelude to balance.

Rule #3

The more you learn, the more you earn. Even more importantly, the more you learn, the more you live.

Rule #4

A positive mental attitude is a key ingredient to a balanced, long, and happy life.

Rule #5

Humor is one of the best ways to get and keep a positive mental attitude. When times get tough, humor helps...even sick humor.

Rule #6

It's nice to be important, but even more important to be nice.

Rule #7

Setting up "win-win" relationships is the ultimate measure of success in life...and in business.

Rule #8

Be a giver, not a taker. They don't put luggage racks on hearses for good reason.

Rule #9

Integrity, good health, family, and friends are worth more than anything money can buy.

Rule #10

Don't forget to have fun. The more fun you have, the more money you make. It works both ways. The more money you make, the more fun you have.