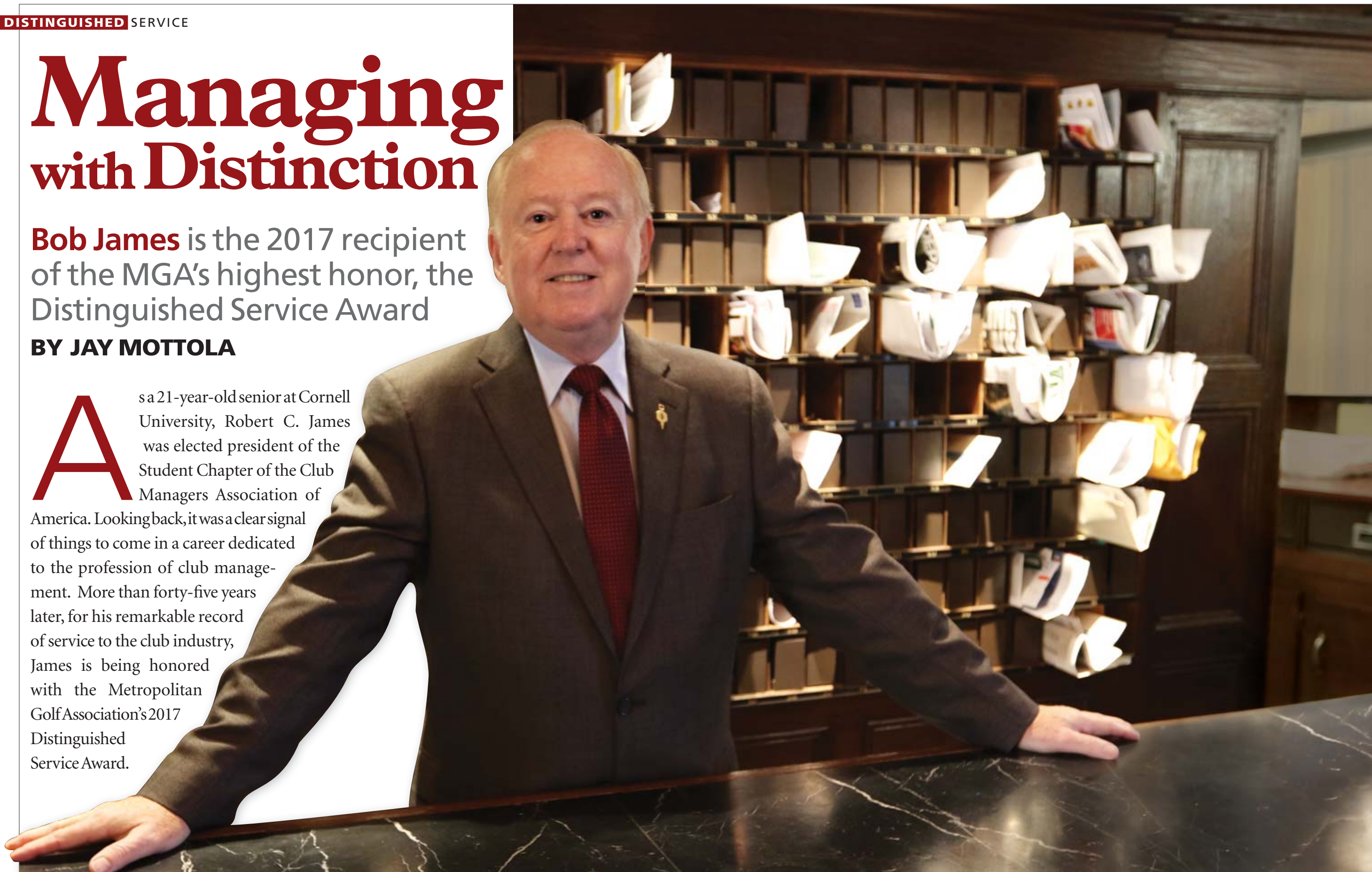


Managing with Distinction

Bob James is the 2017 recipient of the MGA's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award

BY JAY MOTTOLA

As a 21-year-old senior at Cornell University, Robert C. James was elected president of the Student Chapter of the Club Managers Association of America. Looking back, it was a clear signal of things to come in a career dedicated to the profession of club management. More than forty-five years later, for his remarkable record of service to the club industry, James is being honored with the Metropolitan Golf Association's 2017 Distinguished Service Award.



James's introduction to hospitality and the club business came well before he went to college. His father owned and ran a swim and catering club on Long Island, in East Northport. It was a family affair with the parents and siblings all pitching in. The on-the-job training taught James how to roll up his sleeves and get things done, learning from his dad how to run a membership club with integrity.

Soon after graduating from Cornell in 1971, James took his first job in the golf world as the clubhouse manager at Philadelphia Country Club. He progressed quickly and soon accepted a position as the general manager of The Stanwich Club in Greenwich, Conn. James spent five years at Stanwich before moving to Sleepy Hollow Country Club in Scarborough, N.Y., where he was the GM for ten years. His next and last stop was at Westchester Country Club where he served for twenty-six years before retiring this year as Executive Director.

This is the first time the Distinguished Service Award has gone to someone in the club management profession.

The task of running a private golf or country club is a very demanding one. There is a challenging business to run, dozens and dozens of employees to manage, and hundreds of members to please. When events or operations at a club go well it's just expected, and when things go wrong the general manager is the first to take the heat. Bob James did much more than survive these challenges, he thrived in this environment, helping run three of the most prominent clubs in the MGA—incredibly, he actually served as acting GM at both Westchester and Sleepy Hollow during the summer of 1991 while transitioning from one to the other.

Westchester is by far the biggest club operation in the Met Area with more than 1,400 members, 500-plus employees, and an operating budget that is more than twice that of any other area club. During James's tenure there he oversaw more than \$80 million in capital projects and nineteen PGA Tour events. MGA Executive Committee member Phil Halpern, who was Westchester's president and then Board Chair between 2007 and 2013 and worked closely with James, has high praise: "He's terrific. Bob is a quiet but effective leader who helped guide the club through some very challenging economic times. He ran a huge operation but always had the respect of the board, the membership, and—what was really impressive to me—that of the more than 500 staff members he worked with at the club."

"I look at the role of the general manager as being somewhat of an expeditor who helps build a team, coach the team, and bring the team together," James told *The Met Golfer*. "Most of our clubs are

fortunate to have good quality department managers and they're all experts in their field. The general manager needs to see that the information is disseminated down through the departments so that, broadly, everyone understands the goals of the club."

The MGA presents its Distinguished Service Award to an individual who has contributed "distinguished service to golf and its related activities, consistent with the valued standards and honorable traditions of the game." James would be a worthy recipient just based on the work he did in leading these three great clubs over a period of more than 40 years. However, it is his record as a volunteer leader in his profession and to the club industry that sets him apart.

Despite the 24/7 demands of running a club and, with his wife Donna, raising a family in New Canaan, Conn., James somehow found the time not only to give back to his profession at the local, regional, and national level but in almost every case ascended to a leadership position. Education and sharing his knowledge and experience have always been passions of Bob's. He teaches a hospitality class as an adjunct professor at Cornell, is a sought-after speaker on club management, and has mentored dozens of colleagues who have gone on to successful careers in the club industry. He has been an active member of the MGA Presidents Council Advisory Committee for decades, and helped create the Metropolitan Club Foundation after serving as the president of the Met Club Managers Association. He left his imprint nationally as well, serving as a Director of the National Club Association in Washington, DC, and Chair of its Foundation. The career arc that started as the student chapter president at Cornell came full circle this year when James completed his term as board president of the Club Managers Association of America.

CMAA CEO Jeff Morgan, reflecting on James's volunteer leadership, said, "Bob James has spent a lifetime dedicated to the club industry and to the betterment of club management professionals. His contributions will positively affect the profession and club managers for years to come."

This is the first time the Distinguished Service Award has gone to someone in the club management profession. "This is a great honor, beyond belief," says James. "I've attended at least twenty MGA annual dinners over the years and have always been in awe of the DSA recipients. To be recognized among them is truly humbling. They have inspired me to give back to this great game and the industry, and I hope that through my teaching, mentoring, and Association work I too will have an influence on others."

For all he has done for the Met Area golf and club community, Bob James is a most worthy recipient of the MGA's highest honor. ■