

# WATCH OUT FOR HEAVY TRAFFIC

BY BARRY WARD



Love 'em or hate 'em, but don't ignore 'em because, like death, and taxes, thatch and dollar spot, golf carts are not about to go away. They're a growing part of the multi-million pound golf equipment market and they're multiplying like toadstools in a damp wood.

It will be some years, one hopes, before they're as ubiquitous as in America, where in most instances their use is compulsory. On the ground of tradition alone, one suspects that not every British golf club committee would condone them, and most clubs would ban their wholesale use on two major points; wheel track damage and a paucity of garaging space. We'll come to the anti-social aspect later.

There can be no argument that in some instances they are a boon. Elderly or mildly infirm golfers who may otherwise be unable to play can now potter around 18 holes in comfort, and those British clubs which allow limited use of carts should rely upon this criteria as a stipulation. Ad hoc use should be approached warily.

This therapeutic aspect, indeed, is what began it all. In the United States they started a golf rush that became a gold rush. They transformed the face of Florida, socially, economically and even topographically, and in the course of the transformation came a land boom the likes of which hadn't been seen for a century or more.

## Originally for arthritics

The cart was an idea that originated in Texas in 1952 and it was designed for arthritis sufferers, a battery driven, single seater with a rudimentary luggage rack behind. By modern standards it didn't look particularly prepossessing but it caught the imagination and set a few other wheels in motion.

For some years there had been a tradition among wealthy New Yorkers eager to escape the biting cold of the North American winter: come November and they would flee to Florida, to lie on the beach or beside the pool, to bend an elbow and to bask in the sunshine, there to remain until New York had thawed out.

They were not, by and large, athletic. And though the golf course held some aesthetic appeal, the prospect of walking five miles in pursuit of a small white ball held an attraction comparable to alligator wrestling or under-water ballroom dancing. That's when they were introduced to the golf cart.

They were hooked. Before you could say "What's the bet?" the word had spread and golf course home sites began selling like ten dollar Cadillacs.

Within a few years Florida had become Golf State USA. Palm Beach County, where it all began, now has 278 - at last count. There are 932 golf courses in the State and the building continues unabated (35 opened in 1988 and 45 more are currently under construction) making it number one in America.

The value in real estate sales is impossible to compute, to say nothing of hotel profits, green fees and cart rentals, equipment sales, and the contribution to the State's economy by way of the millions of visitors the game attracts. Not to mention the massive employment all this activity generates.

## No speedier play

The incongruous aspects of golf carts is that they don't speed up play.

The subtle difference is that a walking golfer will travel in a straight line (give or take the odd slice) where a pair in a cart will zig zag like a hooker

playing a double dog leg in a cross wind. If they walked as far their legs would drop off.

To compound the problem, many US courses have what they call the 90 degree rule. This means that a cart must stay on the path provided up to a point level with the ball to be played, and only then is it permissible to drive across the fairway to the ball.

The reasons are obvious: just as cart paths are laid to obviate damage and compaction (though in truth they can create erosion problems through water run-off) so are fairways out of bounds.

A team of course marshalls is constantly on patrol to enforce the rule, and it's not unknown for offenders to be asked to head for the clubhouse.

The rationale is obvious: a top class resort course is an expensive beast to maintain. To attract resident golfing guests in the cut-throat world of US resorts your course has to be flawless in condition 365 days a year . . . or the punters will go elsewhere and heads will roll.

Each course will have its own maintenance team (one man per hole is the logistical rule of thumb), equipped with every mod con in terms of plant and machinery. The investment required in maintenance is in the realm of a king's ransom; they're not about to jeopardise that, and the daily fruits it brings, by giving golfers carte blanche with buggies.

This is a point that British golf club committees should ruminat upon when faced with demands for more cart facilities, as doubtless they will in this age of the moneyed yuppie, the infernal combustion engine and its ever-turning, constantly multiplying wheels.



*Cart golf Texas style. Weekday rules at this club-permit twelve players to a group. The first tee starts resembles a Grand Prix, with a stampede that has to be seen to be believed.*

Consider that at most British clubs wide-tired wheels are mandatory on even the humble pull trolley and, on the grounds of potential damage alone, it is difficult to condone the growth of cart use.

Not many British clubs are capable of financing the five or six miles of concrete pathway that would be necessary once numbers rose beyond the minimal minority, and without the paths and a strictly enforced 90 degree rule the average club course would quickly deteriorate: tracks would form on inclines, creating potential run-off problems and erosion: tee and green access points would become compacted and worn, as would fairway mounds already shaven by gang mowers.

A little introspection would reveal how par three holes would suffer particularly badly and it would be advisable to create a circular route, perhaps through adjacent rough or woods, to deny carts access to short fairways and diverting them to a point behind the green.

### Stringent rules

Those clubs already committed to a growing number of carts should contemplate stringent rules before the rot sets in. The previous paragraph is a starting point, and on the matter of diversions and the 90 degree rule it would be advisable to insist upon carts creating their own pathways through the more accessible rough and wooded areas, where the damage they cause would be minimal.

One of the few beneficial side effects of the cart, though it's one which has encouraged it's proliferation, has been received warmly by course architects and constructors. The cart

creates space. More specifically, it allows all the land available to be utilised. A US resort of 2,000 acres plus which didn't have 250 acres or more to play with for a new course would be a rare one indeed. With this and the cart in mind, the architects don't stint on space when they settle down to doodle.

The frequent consequence is vast distances between the green and the next tee, often as much as a minute away by cart. Walking, plainly, would be out of the question in this scenario. Few, very few, British clubs are blessed with such expansive estates, in fact the reverse is often the case. There's often only a minimal amount of suitable land available for garaging them.

At my club, for instance, where about a dozen members have carts, one owner told me it had cost £6,000 to buy his vehicle and pay for the construction of a garage at the club. There's no space available for further garages, though there's no decline in demand. One can only ponder on the investment potential. My friend wouldn't put a figure on his likely selling price.

### So anti-social

Certain other members of my club would give a silent cheer at the news that the fleet of carts has reached its optimum number. Not a few of us consider them a pain in the bumper at best, particularly the petrol driven version, which is both smelly and noisy.

More than that, they're anti-social. In a recent medal my two playing partners shared a cart while I walked. It was akin to playing alone. The others always seemed to be chuffing off ahead, nattering away as they searched for their balls and weighed up their shots, leaving me trudging along in the rear. I don't think we exchanged more than fifty words during the whole round.

In truth, holidays apart there's little or nothing to be said in their favour, but in an age when declining standards are the norm and the yuppies are on the rampage such complaints will ring few bells. Traditions count for naught these days and I suspect mine is a lone voice.

Anyone for tennis?



*In Texas they make their own rules! NOT something we want to see in Great Britain.*