TOM WALSH: PGA, 1940, 1941

In 1909, when Tom Walsh was a 11-year old caddie, the Professional Golfers’ Assn. of America didn’t have an educational program—there wasn’t a PGA.

In 1940, when Walsh took over as president of the 1,400-member PGA he started an educational program with a $1,000 allotment.

Today the theory behind Walsh’s educational programs still exists: however, the scope has been broadened to include over 7,000 golf professionals, and encompasses an educational program estimated in 1972 at over $250,000.

Walsh’s attempts to educate the professional and the public have gone a long way toward placing golf near the pinnacle of this nation’s leisure time and recreational activities.

Today at age 74, Walsh owns a golf course and is still an active head professional. He shot a 77 last year and his golf shop grossed $150,000. He has seen his struggles to improve the status of the golf professional finally begin bearing fruit, not only for the touring pros, but more importantly, for the underpublicized and underrated home or club professional.

Educating its members has been a goal of the PGA since its inception in 1916, but an actual training program never got beyond the drawing boards in the early years. To understand the evolution of the educational program conceived by Walsh and other PGA officials in 1940, it is necessary to examine the steps which led to the creation of a program.

The eldest of 10 children, Walsh got his golfing baptismal as a caddie at Beverly CC in Chicago. Because the caddie system was “the way” to become a head professional, his initial crusade in golf revolved around improving the lot of his fellow caddies.

“When I was 12 years old, I participated in a caddie strike for more money,” Walsh recalls. “At the time we were getting 15 cents an hour and we upped the demand to 20 cents,” he laughs. “We didn’t get the nickel raise, but a great fringe benefit was that the caddies were allowed to play on Mondays, and I guess this is when realization of the need for increased education began. With my four golfing brothers—Frank, John, Marty and Packy—we organized a golf school in the Chicago area. I went to Arch Ward, editor of the Chicago Tribune, and we started the largest effort toward educating the public about golf with the Chicago Tribune Golf School in 1933. We eventually gave golf instruction to more than 100,000 Chicago-area golfers until the school’s demise in 1970.”

It was during this period (1927) that Walsh attempted to find out what made a successful golf professional. “We had our own individual ideas on how important we were and what our functions at the club should be, but the low income of many of the professionals convinced me that we were not giving the public what they wanted. We ran a survey in our golf shop in 1927, but we didn’t ask the professional, we asked the people who employed us—the members,” he says. “We had this electrical box rigged up where all of the people who came into the golf shop could mark down what they looked for in a golf professional. Their responses were startling and almost unanimous,” Walsh recalls, “and destroyed some (Continued on page 24)
of the previous notions which some of the ‘prima donna’ professionals had been operating under. Some pros felt as long as you played good golf or improved the members’ golf game they would patronize your shop. However, the first thing which golfers looked for in a professional was personality,” Walsh comments. “Next in order of importance were teaching ability, a neat appearance and a well-stocked pro shop. Trailing in order of importance were playing ability, keeping appointments, club storage room in good order, knowledge of fitting clubs, don’t gamble, knowledge of the rules and interest in caddies. The results of the survey surprised most of the professionals,” Walsh says, “because we were inclined to put playing and teaching ability in the top slots.”

The emphasis on personality, teaching and merchandising indirectly set the stage for the future PGA educational program. “I had always wanted to build a daily fee course,” he says, “and I bought land in 1927 and built Westgate Valley in Chicago. The course opened in 1929. Three months later the Depression left me with a $90,000 mortgage. The struggles of most golf professionals to try to make a living during the Depression made me realize that only greater emphasis on education was the answer if the pro was to get out of a rut.

“You see,” Walsh continues, “the pro was not only financially poor during the 1930s, but also suffered from a poor public image, in-fighting within the sectional organizations, a lack of communications with his members and the national organization and extremely bad relations with golf equipment manufacturers. Because most of the professionals had risen up through the caddie ranks,” Walsh explains, “they could teach and play golf, but the business side of golf was almost totally ignored. Business procedures, accounting and merchandising were foreign to us because our education, few of us had any college training, did not extend to the business arena. Our poor relations with manufacturers was due to the poor credit risks of professionals. Bills weren’t paid and the pro seldom stocked enough merchandise or supplies.”

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Walsh
“I guess the biggest change that has taken place since the 1940s is the role of the professional,” Walsh says. “To some people it is seen as diminishing, to others, it’s a change of direction. In the early days,” Walsh says, “the pro had the greatest contact with the members and was usually the liaison between the greenskeeper, who was usually under the pro, and the club house manager. This arrangement might have created conflict and resentment among the professional and the greenskeepers as the professional status of the greenskeeper and club manager increased. But, just as the roles of maintenance and operation of the golf course increased in stature, operating a pro shop has become a full-time job. The pro does not have the time, nor is he paid, for wearing three hats.

Walsh served only two years as president of the PGA and then resigned from the organization. “I guess it caused a little controversy,” he says, “but previously no time limit had been set on how many terms a president of the national could serve. I felt in order for the association to move ahead and make the professional’s life more fruitful, then officers of the PGA should step aside after a year of service. This encourages more people to become active in the association and also pumps new blood with fresh ideas into positions of leadership. Being an officer is a full-time responsibility, or should be,” Walsh says, “and if a person stays in office more than one year, then administrative duties begin to bog him down. Something has to suffer,” he says, “it’s either his responsibility to his club and members, or it is the PGA.”

Although Walsh concedes that TV, the golf car and caddie cart have probably given golf the popularity and practicability for all people, not just the rich who could afford country clubs, he feels the success of the sport belongs to the club professionals. “They have responded to the changing needs of the public and the sport,” Walsh states. “Their dedication toward promoting golf to their members has not only provided them with a life which is satisfying and rewarding, but has been good for the game, their fellow professionals and their fellow man.”