

STATUS REPORT:

Pro Shop BUSINESS 1973

WEST

by DON CURLEE

SAN FRANCISCO—It was a case of "East meets West" for golf merchandisers in the West this year after a prolonged rainy and cool season showed professionals what it's like to be practically shut down for months at a time.

Even so, play and purchasing resumed in April, and May and June set records for some pro shops. In spite of the January to March forced layoff, most professionals here expect 1973 to equal or surpass 1972 in volume.

Not surprisingly, the item most in demand by consumers has been clubs, mostly the result of interest in investment cast irons, heel-toe balance, graphite shafts and some new manufacturers in the equipment field that are giving the club market an interesting twist.

Ball sales are better than expected in almost every shop that was contacted. There is strong demand for balls with the Surlyn cover and those with new dimple patterns or other distinctive features and improvements.

Beyond that, shoes are the best selling items, and perhaps the only other piece of merchandise professionals are excited about. The heaviest shoe business is being done in the \$25 to \$35 range, even for professionals at well-established private clubs.

Enthusiasm is waning rapidly for soft goods, especially for women. As one public course professional in Fresno put it, "The women at my course are making their own

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by JOE DOAN

CHICAGO—Some men curse the darkness; others light a candle, which describes the extremes in the states of mind of two area professionals, surveyed in mid-June concerning business conditions at their shops for the first 10 weeks of 1973. As for 18 others, who were queried, their replies ran from "lousy" to "not too bad considering the weather." A kind of loose summing up of the reports from the 20 professionals shows that from Highland Park to Kankakee and Aurora-Joliet to the Lake, business was off by approximately 10 per cent. Not from 1972, which was equally bad, but from the pro's anticipated or hoped-for volume.

The weather was roundly re-

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by STEPHEN W. BYERS

NEW YORK—If you rushed into an Eastern pro shop between nines to buy protection against a capricious sky, you'd probably be advised to settle your ardor for the second nine and watch those arbitrary black clouds from the safety of the bar, unless being wet to the skin improves your game. But try to bridle your pique at the helpless shrug of the club professional; there was no way he could predict the relentless wet deluge that has, thus far, sabotaged the '73 Eastern golf season, leaving in its path empty shelves where rain gear used to be and a 50 per cent sales drop under '72 reflected by the surplus merchandise jamming the rest of the shop.

Professionals have expressed little optimism that even clear skies accompanied by a buying surge could rescue the 1973 selling season from a "record low" statistical epilogue.

This season has been variously described by professionals as "the most consistently nasty golfing weather I can recall and I've been in the business 19 years," and this more despondent pro's observation, "A season like this in '74 will find me in another business."

The Mill River Plan (Ray Montgomery), the Multiple Sales Plan (Craig Shankland) and divers other sales techniques helped a few indomitable pros to mellow their description of the '73 selling season from "disastrous" to "inauspicious." These few undaunted

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golf clothes from doubleknit fabrics. It has become a matter of pride among them—who can come up with the best color coordination and styles. You can't compete with that by selling off the rack."

He admitted that private course members in his area probably are more inclined to buy apparel lines.

He plans to use his location to better advantage in regard to soft goods. His area, he said, is about a year behind the metropolitan areas of San Francisco and Los Angeles in styles, so he plans to stock up for next year on styles that are good this year in the urban areas.

Although the apparel outlook is dim for most professionals, one private club professional in Oakland said that the only growth he can foresee for his shop is in soft goods, and he lumps golf gloves with apparel in this category. He says that his members are somewhat confused about the wide range of club features, some of which he feels the golf industry branded as old fashioned not long ago—torque and the convex sole wedge, for example.

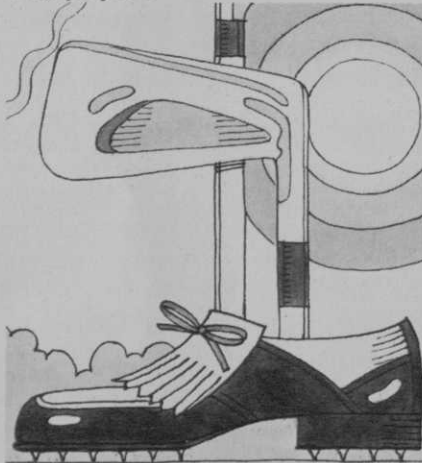
Another professional at a public course in Oakland, who runs several other sales outlets, said that demand for graphite-shafted clubs has been far ahead of supply during

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viled, as it is so often in the spring, but all was not despair. Following seven fully or partly washed-out weekends in April to May, two, and at most places, three, fine golf playing days were ushered in for the Memorial Day holiday and business immediately started humming. For the next two weeks the hum continued, carrying through a day when the temperature hit a record 94 degrees and two others when it reached 90. The heat wasn't dissuading anyone from playing golf; now that the rain was over and gone and the sun had broken through, there was great enthusiasm for making up the spring's lost rounds. From June 1 through the 17th most courses were swamped with players.



"If the weather holds through the summer," three out of five professionals say, "we'll make up what we lost in April and May." There is not unanimity of opinion on this, however. One out of three shop operators resolutely maintains that sales lost in the spring are never recouped.

But to get back to the allusion about darkness and lighting a candle, and first accentuating the positive:

Early in May, Bill Heald of Riverside GC, just southwest of Chicago's city limits, was sitting around watching the rain beat down on the putting clock in front of the shop. He was feeling somewhat inclined to self-commiseration due to the rather sad state of business. Club sales, though, weren't bad, and the male members were doing

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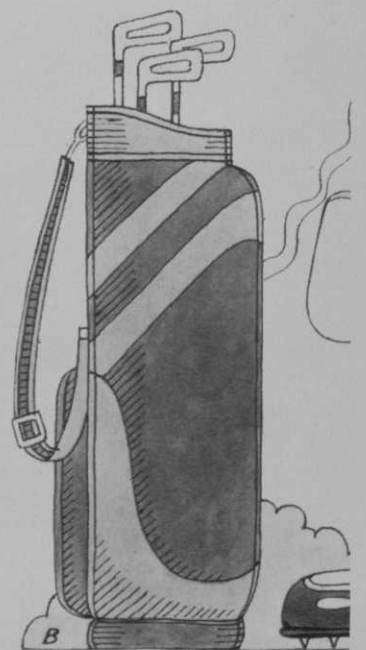
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were joined by some club pros in Florida, who enjoyed a fruitful peak season in a mild, dry '73 winter. For them, the predictable intermittent daily showers of summer occur in the off season and do little harm to total annual sales.

Craig Shankland, head professional at Middle Bay CC, admits that even his Multiple Sales Plan has only partially mollified what has been the worst selling season in his years at Middle Bay. Over-all, Shankland has struggled to maintain a fair measure of the axiom in pro shop merchandising—the 40 per cent markup.

Until this season his Multiple Sales Plan, a program that offers progressive discounts for members who buy items in multiples (*i.e.*, 10 per cent off for a single item purchase, 20 per cent off for two items and 30 per cent off for three), had exploded his pro shop sales but, as Shankland's pro shop coordinator, Bruce Neinstad, says, "With weather like we've been getting it would be hard to draw a crowd if you were giving merchandise away." Aside from bad weather, one pro cited as the reason for his slow '73 season, that much of his membership maintains winter residences in the South and stayed there later this season, some as late as the end of April.

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the past two to three months. He feels that the investment cast irons have stimulated his sales substantially, and in spite of the layoff during the bad weather, he expects his gross to be up by 20 per cent over 1972.

Nevertheless, he felt the sag when the rains kept players away for weeks at a time. "They lose the golf bug after a while, and it's hard to get started again," he said.

One private club professional (Menlo Park) found a surprising accessory item this year in belts, even though he carries a very limited inventory of soft goods and merchandise generally.

He echoed what some of the other professionals said when he specified the woods from a local Bay Area club manufacturer as his best seller during the past few months. This clubmaker has nudged into the market enthusiastically.

Similarly, "make up" bags by specialty manufacturers have been a strong item for one public course professional in San Jose. He orders golf bags from a Los Angeles manufacturer made to his order, eliminating some features his customers aren't interested in, incorporating a wider and often longer strap and selling them below the price of name bags. He estimates his total bag sales at about 150 a month.

Although most of the professionals seemed concerned about keeping in stock a sufficient supply of new clubs, one complained of competition by the downtown shops specializing in close-outs in the Martinez area. "We're getting away from the average run of merchandise," he said. "We're steering away from the manufacturer that promotes close-outs."

Another municipal course professional in San Mateo said the higher price of some of the investment cast irons are not holding back his players. He has enjoyed brisk shoe sales in the \$28 to \$30 bracket and expects over-all volume to be about the same as 1972 in spite of flooding, which made his course unplayable for nearly three months. "The shop was open," he said, "but nobody was around."

A professional at a municipal course in Berkeley is building business around low-priced merchandise—shoes at \$22.50 and a 20 per cent discount on all ball sales.

"Our predecessors here tried to sell \$40 to \$50 shoes, and it just didn't create any volume. We'll move up in price and quality when we find what is right for our clientele," he said, "but we're offering the best quality for the price that golfers can get anywhere."

He has found that slacks in the \$10 to \$12 range sell, so he stocks and displays them attractively in styles and patterns the competing department stores don't supply. He is one of the few professionals surveyed who is excited about apparel sales this year.

They all agree on one point—the poor quality of last winter's weather and on merchandising plans in case of a repeat performance—stock plenty of water skis. □

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something about stocking up on the season's attire. But the women were only looking and not buying, as is their wont in rainy weather. Something was needed to stir them. A sale? No self respecting pro is going to run a sale on women's wear in May, Bill decided, even though he was itching to start liquidating it. But a sale in the early season is poor psychology.

Then inspiration struck Heald. He could run a sale without using that opprobrious word by an ingenious method of discounting merchandise. Here is what he did: He made up envelopes in which 10 per cent discounts were granted to about 85 or 90 per cent of his women customers. The remaining envelopes contained discounts ranging up to 25 per cent. The envelopes were sealed, then drawn by lot, but nobody was permitted to unseal an envelope until after a purchase was made.

The composite discount was about 12 or 13 per cent, considerably lower than the 20 or 25 Heald would have been expected to give if he had put on a bona fide sale. The gambling instincts of his female members were whetted, and sales for the short period in which the envelope scheme was in force

was brisk. It is an idea that perhaps can be copied by other professionals who are pressed to get some of their money out of their stock and, at the same time, don't want to give the franchise away.

But where Heald saw fit to light a candle, there is a cohort at a Northside club who can't get the gloom or darkness out of his system. He wonders if the pro shop business is ever going to come back to what it was a few years ago. "For the last two or three years we have kept telling ourselves that it has been the weather that has hurt us," says this man, "but maybe we're not facing up to the facts. Our troubles may go deeper than that."

All is not lost, though, in the shop of this pro who, incidentally, has a reputation of being an imaginative and successful merchandiser and has some good seasons behind him. Club sales have been high in 1973 at his club, largely because, as he states, manufacturers have shown imagination in retooling their products and even more imagination in advertising the changes they have introduced. His ball sales for the season will probably get back to normal, although off to a slow start, because of the weather.

GOLFDOM's survey was made by telephone. The mood of the 20 pros who were interviewed was somewhere in between restrained optimism and predictions that if the weather holds through July and August the pro will squeak through and have a fair season. When asked about the over-all sales picture, the first reaction of about three out of five pros was to pronounce it as not being good, but there were immediate qualifications. "It has picked up a lot since Memorial Day," was the way these were usually worded. "Everyone is bursting to get out and play. Traffic is way up in the last two weeks and that's what it takes to make sales. From here on, everything depends on the weather. There's a lot of money around, people seem to be more willing to spend than they have in two or three years, and if we can keep them coming to the club we'll struggle back to having a fair season in spite of the early setback."

There isn't much doubt that club sales in April and May were all that

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