

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF "DOWNTOWN" COMPETITION

GOLFDOM's sleuthing of the "downtown" competition reveals a surprising lack of expertise. Pros also might do some local detective work

by DOUGLAS LUTZ

"Know anything about these things?" the rather portly gentleman on my left, sounding more than slightly frustrated, addressed himself to me. Muttering annoyances, he fumbled through a rack of literally hundreds of woods, wedges, irons and putters. One of New York City's major department stores was clearing house.

Half-heartedly my fellow shopper lifted a driver, then a three-wood from the rack. When I capsuled the differences between driver and fairway wood, he thanked me and glanced around the nicely arranged 20 by 40-foot rectangle set aside for

a golf shop in the store's sporting goods department.

"Seems to me they oughta have a salesman around here. Someone who knows something about golf. Someone who can give us some help," he mumbled as he stalked off and disappeared on the down escalator.

Actually, there was someone to help: a very confused young lady,

who was having difficulty with a display cabinet lock. Her frustrated customer, interested in a dozen golf balls, shifted impatiently from foot to foot. He tapped out an annoyed staccato on the glass counter top with his plastic charge card. Meanwhile, another young man idly ex-

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DOWNTOWN *continued*

amined price tags on vinyl golf bags. Unapproached by any salesman, he, too, wondered off to lose himself among soft goods racks nearby.

This typical department store golf shop scene did not take place on a gloomy Tuesday morning around 11 a.m., when one might expect a skeleton force to be in attendance. It was a Saturday. The store was full of eager shoppers.

Recently, I scouted the "downtown" competition, the discount scene and the golf equipment supermarkets. My detective forays were to determine what, if anything, was being offered beyond reduced prices. Were there lessons to be learned from retail sales techniques that might prove valuable in the pro shop? Is an unaffiliated golfer in safe hands when being advised by salesmen in retail stores? In fact, does the sales force handling volume sales have any expertise with which to field questions from undecided golfers? In reverse, what is the reaction of the retailer to professionals? Does he view them as the competition?

Specifics were used to determine the degree of expertise the potential customer might expect in a retail situation. The keys were shaft flex, swing weight, club length, construction of clubhead and type of shaft, degree of wood face loft, ball compression and why leather grips as opposed to rubber or vice versa. Simple, commonplace terminology in any pro shop. A foreign language, I found out, in many retail outlets!

In one instance I was told swing weight was the process by which your weight shifted during your swing. And how did that relate to the club itself? The club? No relation at all. If you swing correctly your weight just redistributes itself, was offered as a definition.

In another situation in a highway discount house on Long Island, which is strategically located in an area where there are a minimum of 20 golf courses within 10 miles of the store, the salesman defined swing weight as the ratio between relative heaviness of the irons. The most swing weight was given to the sand wedge, because of its heavy flange. This same outlet dodged

questions on what shaft flex I might consider and did they recommend lightweight steel or carbon shafts. A feeling of relief was obvious when I suggested that perhaps I should talk with a golf pro and then return.

Conversely, one of New York City's ancient and famous sporting goods companies was able to offer skilled professional help. They knew all the answers and were more than willing to explain everything to this "novice." This old, established firm has experts in all fields, but is not competition for the golf professional in the usual sense. They are not a discount store. Occasional sales are featured, of course, but rarely, if ever, a line of discounted merchandise. In fact, in many instances, the local area professionals can easily undersell this mercantile giant. Their house brands in hard goods can easily compete with offerings at the pro shops. Certainly, in the retail business, they are unique.

Recently, one of the city's largest discount sporting goods stores initiated professional help in several departments. They have even taken their message of this new service to local television in an ad campaign encouraging viewer inquiry. There are mixed feelings about the need for such service, because "off the street" trade is brisk, space is limited and too much time may be needed to clinch individual sales. Turnover is the key to profits in this supermarket situation. Merchandise tends to move itself, because most golf shoppers are bargain hunters who come in predetermined to buy.

One fault of retail outlets is lack of individual attention. Yet many unaffiliated golfers not used to dealing with a professional when making hard goods purchases prefer to be left alone to finger price tags and waggle woods, even if they frequently do not have enough room in which to take a full swing. Because their principal motivation is in saving money, they don't want a lecture on swing weight, shaft flex or length. They don't want the embarrassment of deciding against the professional's advice because the price tag may be too high. It's a contradiction, but nevertheless that's how it works. As one manager in the golf/tennis section of a sporting goods store said recently,

"The average duffer feels he knows more than the average salesman. Up against a pro, though, he knows he's outclassed. He's embarrassed. Most of the pros I know expect their customers to have blind faith in what they're saying. Any guy with dough to spend or a charge card burning in his wallet is an easy sale for us. We just leave him alone. He'll buy. There's such a thing as being too helpful, which I think a lot of pros are."

Observing first hand the selling practices at the retail level may provide some clues to sales success. And some devices to be avoided.

Retail salesmen always seem to know the magic moment to step in, ready to wrap up your purchases. Spotting the buyer among the browsers is a technique retail salesmen have developed into a science. They can sniff out a commission. In many operations, it's called closing. It may require only a few words confirming the buyer's choice, expanding his ego by concurring with his decisions. That a golfer may be leaving the store laden with a set of golf clubs completely contrary to his build and ability usually is of little consequence to the seller.

In determining further whether or not any expert knowledge was available, I queried several sales people on length of shaft best suited to my size. Should I use a longer or shorter than standard length?

Out of my own frustration I was tempted to explain why it might be important to know that a driver's length had a direct relationship to the golfer's stature whenever I encountered a blank stare or a fumbling apology. While length of shaft didn't throw too many clerks (most understood the question, but could not offer any suggestions or recommendations beyond finding something comfortable), any query about the degree of loft caused panic. The fact that the slope of a club face might be measurable and important escaped most retail clerks. A few scurried around checking box labels in hopes of finding some magic numbers to report on.

Opinions varied greatly as to what ball compression might best suit my game. Wisely, most retail salesmen skirted the issue. Of the 14 queries on this subject only three

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countered with questions of their own. What kind of game did I shoot? Was I a big hitter? Did I keep the ball in play or was my tendency to hook or slice? When I revealed I was a bogey golfer with tendencies to hook and slice occasionally, two of the three suggested low compression. The third, however, suggested high compression. The other 11 respondents really had no opinion other than suggesting experimenting.

In most instances varied opinions seemed to be standard procedure. For instance, from store to store rationales for using leather grips were balanced by those favoring rubber. Usually the reason given was that leather or rubber, depending on who you were talking with, was less likely to be slippery.

There was some excitement, and possibly a salesman gleam, when carbon/graphite was mentioned. Most retail outlets had heard of the new shafts, of course, and were anxiously waiting for their introduction on a mass produced level. "We'll wait," one retailer said, "un-

til they're proven on the pro tour. It's inevitable they'll be produced cheaper than they are now. We'll get our share of the market."

Although most of the retail outlets canvassed on specific questions about equipment would not have given the average serious golfer much confidence, they did offer other things that might be helpful in the pro shop.

Most use excellent display techniques. Stock is plentiful and prices clearly marked. Individual attention, due to the volume of business, is almost never at hand, but any shopper can at least select his price range before seeking help. Inevitably, all retail outlets offer charging privileges, which make large purchases easier. Often being able to "charge it" makes the difference between a browser and a buyer. Large printed signs announcing specials, sales and closeouts are commonplace. Specials featuring a set of clubs and a bag for one price are a common device used to clear out mid-season merchandise. In the retail scene the special sale is a way of life.

The answers to all our questions

reveal an interesting and challenging situation for the professional. Assorted opinions and reactions on these and other queries, as well as close observations of retail and discount sales departments all point to one key factor in understanding your competition. You have the advantage, generally speaking, and to put it bluntly, they don't know what the hell they're talking about!

Any professional concerned with competition from discount houses, shopping center bargains and retail advertised specials owes it to himself to do a little detective work. A few hours at random times is all it takes: observation, mental notes on display and sign work, which you feel are eye catching enough to be potentially useful; a few key questions in any golf section of a sporting goods department. When you hear some of the responses to legitimate questions on equipment, most of which are motivated by commissions rather than the desire to help golfers, you'll be hard pressed to keep a straight face. You'll walk away wondering why you've been so worried. □

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of proving they can do a man's job as well as, or better than, a man."

Although the Florida sun might be a fringe benefit, along with the free oranges and grapefruit growing on the hundreds of trees kept intact from the former citrus farm from which the courses were carved, the groundskeepers' work schedule is far from leisurely. On weekdays, they start at 7 a.m. and finish at 4:30 p.m., with a half-hour for lunch. All work a half-day on Saturdays, and using a rotation schedule, a few must be there from two to three hours each Sunday to mow the greens. The work week averages about 50 hours, with time-and-a-half pay after 40 hours.

The women average about \$125 a week, slightly higher than they could earn in other occupations in this area.

Three of the four first four women he hired now are foremen—Jeri Munro, Nancy Sizemore from Tarpon Springs, and Diane Dunn from Flossmoor, Ill.—a title that Grant feels he should change, perhaps permanently. □