

# RETAILER OR TEACHER: WHICH IS THE PRO'S PRIMARY ROLE?

GOLFDOM's statistics show that lessons are contributing less and less to the professional's income compared to sales of merchandise. Aside from the story the statistics tell, there still remain two schools of thought on the importance of each function

by JOE DOAN

Is the teaching of golf becoming a diminishing if not a lost art? Have professionals become so preoccupied with selling soft goods and notions that they are phasing themselves out of the teaching end of the game? Is revenue from instruction contributing so little to the gross that the professional is approaching the point where it isn't economically feasible to make lessons available? Are clubs saddling their professionals with so many extra duties that they no longer have much time to devote to teaching? Is a large percentage of the teaching now entrusted to assistants professionals?

You won't get resolute or unqualified no's to these questions or to others in the same vein that may be asked. The professional's situation isn't the same as it was 35 years ago, and maybe as late as 20 or 25 years ago, when most of the emphasis was on the playing of the game and very little on the accouterments.

"It's a Saks Fifth Avenue operation now," says one Chicago District professional, who is nearing retirement age. "The merchant princes have taken over." He smiles when he says that, but he can't bleep out the scorn in his voice. Allowance has to be made for scorn when an elder discusses the young working in his profession.

"But a young guy can't get by at a club if he isn't a teacher," the old professional is reminded. "The members wouldn't stand for it."

"Is that so?" replies the aging oak who had made one concession

to the changing times, but no more—his sideburns come down all the way to the lobes. "The last thing they ask about when they're hiring a professional nowadays is whether he's a player. They don't stop to think if he can't play, he can't teach. What clubs are interested in now is getting a guy who knows how to arrange merchandise and keep books. The members are more interested in having an attractive pro shop than they are in their games. Status stuff, you know."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Hell, yes, I do. It used to be that you made your living giving lessons. Now they only account for 10 per cent—maybe closer to 5—of your gross. Why, I haven't given a playing lesson since 1968. Now all it is is those 30-minute extension courses. 'Give me five minutes a day and I'll make a great golfer of you.'"

"People are better players today, aren't they?"

"Not if you check the scores." Pause. "Anyway, they have better equipment and the courses are a lot better."

"You wouldn't want to go back to 1950?"

"What was wrong with it?"

A conversation like this can go on all afternoon, without the old professional backing up so much as a single pace. He scores points. Even the young men in the pro business will admit this. They will tell you that some of their contemporaries loathe teaching, that they duck teaching certain members and that many of them would

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rather stay in the pro shop than go out on the practice tee. When it comes to naming names, the professionals who make these accusations won't do it—tact and diplomacy are involved—and, too, much of what they hear about some of their fellow professionals avoiding the teaching range comes from a second-hand source.

The economics of the things can't be ignored. Can a shop operator who has from \$20,000 to \$40,000 tied up in stock afford much time to teaching, which nets him around \$2,500 a year? With his substantial investment, doesn't good business sense dictate that he devote most of his time to merchandising? Or, such time that he doesn't have to give to scheduling and running club tournament events in return for the retainer he is paid? With his normally fully occupied day, in which he often buzzes around for 10 or 12 hours handling an oddment of jobs (which he never could account for on a time sheet), isn't the head professional justified in assigning most of the teaching load to his assistant?

Quite a few head professionals are doing this. Not the full load but the larger share of it. They say they have no other choice. Asked if they are charged by the membership with shirking responsibility by passing off the teaching program to their assistants, most head professionals say they aren't. The old prejudice against being taught by an assistant no longer prevails at most clubs. At many places, the assistant may be a better player than the head professional; so there is the presumption that he is a better teacher. Another thing that is often presumed is that, because the assistant is lately graduated from the PGA finishing school, he is perhaps privy to more up-to-date teaching methods than the man for whom he works. Going back to the prejudice theory, as many players as not at the typical country club prefer to take lessons from the assistant rather than from the head professional. This generally can be said of women and high handicap players. It is perhaps because so many of them are shy about displaying their swings or games for the

head man. Another factor that may result in the assistant getting more teaching time is that his fee is around \$2 less per hour than that of the head professional.

All this doesn't mean that the assistant professionals have taken over the lesson range. A recent survey of 20 Chicago District professionals indicates that the Number Two man is doing somewhere close to 50 per cent of the teaching work. At a majority of clubs, it seems that the assistant has his following among the members just as the head professional has his. After these are established, there isn't too much crossing over. Once a player becomes accustomed to the teaching style of either an assistant or the head professional, he is reluctant to make a change in his instructor. The lesson continuity factor also plays a strong part in going along with the same teacher.

Professionals have a mercenary motive in getting their assistants into teaching. The latter's salaries can be partially defrayed from the fees they pick up on the lesson tee. An ideal arrangement is to keep the assistant busy giving lessons in the morning and early afternoon hours, filling in the not necessarily Tuesday through Friday "dead" time, but the non-revenue producing time. At some clubs this is done to a rather surprisingly large degree by giving lessons to people who don't belong to the club. This is referred to as "walk-in" business, but in almost cases it is done through reservation. Not too many years ago, one well-known teaching professional developed such a large volume among his non-member following that a halt finally had to be called. It got to the point that it was almost impossible for members to reserve time with him on the lesson tee.

Considering that there is at least four or five hours "dead" time each day in a pro shop operation at a private club, it is a kind of curious thing that lesson-giving isn't promoted more than it is. Usually, the lesson reservation book is kept out on the counter near the cash register where everyone can see it, and the familiar "Lessons by Appointment" sign is conspicuously (but not always) displayed. Some shops

post their rates. But that is as far as it goes. It has always been that way, even back in the days when our old professional was laboring on the range from eight to 10 hours a day. "We didn't have to promote lesson business," says this man. "People knew we were there to teach."

Now, nobody knows why lesson giving isn't promoted. "It's traditional," says one professional. "One of those things that nobody does." Frank Witt, who has been at Cress Creek CC in Naperville, Ill., for a decade maintains that lesson revenue is the most stable thing about a pro operation. "You can count on netting about the same amount every year, whether times are good or bad," he says. "Members will take a given quota of lessons and that's it. I give almost exactly the same number of lessons now as I did in my third year here. It hasn't changed."

However, another professional, who has been at his club in a Northern Chicago suburb for six years, has more than doubled his lesson revenue since he took over. In 1972, he and an assistant both grossed around \$5,000 on the teaching range. How does he do it? To start with, he is at a club where a lot of golf is played. He feels that statistics prove that earnings from lessons are directly proportional to rounds played at a club. But heavy play won't guarantee success unless lessons are solicited. Solicitation is as simple as suggesting a lesson or series of them when a player comes into the shop and starts discussing his problems. "A pro has to be ready to jump on these openings," says this man. "Probably most of them don't. They say try this or try that and let it go at that. They miss the cue to suggest a lesson. You don't have to be a downright mercenary about it, but you have to be alert to the possibility that this person wants a lesson.

"Teaching," adds this professional, "is important for job security. And nobody will ever convince me that the practice range isn't the starting point for a high percentage of sales."

The weather, if nothing else, curtailed lesson giving at Chicago District clubs in 1972, but professionals in general aren't willing to

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**RETAILER/TEACHER** *continued*

concede that lesson business was off from the previous season by as much as the national average of 11.9 per cent, as indicated in GOLFDOM's survey (February issue, p. 29). The decline was in the neighborhood of 5 per cent in the Chicago area. However, the range between the rise and decline in lesson giving was wider than it may have been in a long, long time—up in a few cases to around 10 per cent and down in another, isolated one to 20 per cent. More professionals than not said their lesson volume was a little lower than it had been the previous year.

Conversely, sales of merchandise have been rising steadily, capping with a 24.7 per cent increase in 1972 over 1971. These percentages would make one wonder just how much emphasis lesson-giving should receive.

Lesson giving in the southern part of the District, which wasn't too hard hit by rain last season, was as good or better than it had ever been. However, in the north and west sector, where as many as 20 to 40 playings days were lost due to the weather, business naturally was off. Lost lesson giving time, though, wasn't in anything like direct proportion to lost playing time. Several professionals report that on days when the course was closed, it was still possible to use the practice range. A scattering of professionals say they managed to jam in a lot of lessons in 1972 by spending more time on the teaching tee than they normally do when the weather is right.

Some professionals feel that if they had had indoor facilities last year, their lesson business wouldn't have suffered. But at clubs where they have facilities for teaching under roof, professionals say this isn't necessarily so. In the summertime people don't like to practice or take lessons indoors. They want to be outside where they can see the ball fly, if only 125 or 150 yards out, and not plop into a net. Except for low handicap players, who are more concerned with making contact than getting distance, club members are more receptive to teaching when it done outdoors.

GOLFDOM'S survey shows that in-

come from lessons at private clubs averaged only \$1,700 in 1972, down from \$2,000 the previous year. These are, of course, national averages and reflect revenue at many locations much smaller than typical Chicago District clubs. Most Chicago professionals said that they thought the average would be at least \$2,500. They based their estimates on a \$10 minimum fee and at least 250 teaching hours per club per year. About three out of four Chicago professionals estimate that they and their assistants teach a total of 400 hours and some put the figure at 500. The instruction fee for head professionals is in the \$12 to \$13 per hour range and is from \$2 to \$3 lower for assistants.

None of the Chicago District professionals who were surveyed uses video in teaching. One reason is that the camera, monitor and tape combination costs in the neighborhood of \$1,500 and, except in only a few instances, it isn't thought that teaching revenue are large enough to justify that kind of an expenditure. A second reason for not introducing video is that most practice ranges aren't equipped with electrical outlets. However, about one out of four professionals report that they used movie cameras from time to time in helping their pupils to study and improve their swings.

None of the 20 Chicago District professionals whom GOLFDOM queried is willing to concede that he personally is a "merchant" prince; as charged by the aging contemporary. There has been vast changes in pro shop operations since he came on the scene 25 or 35 years ago, something that he himself has had to recognize and swing over to, otherwise he wouldn't still be in the business. Nobody can say whether the changes have improved the game, but there is no question that members and players have dictated them. Maybe the oldtimer should take the view that while the modern professional is giving golfers the elegant merchandise and fashionable pro shops they want, he isn't neglecting the teaching side of the game. It may be slightly diminished from what it was years ago, but few golfers have detected this or are complaining about it. □

**GRAFFIS** *from page 8*

Acres (Fla.) CC two courses. Vach formerly was at Golden Gate CC, near Naples... *Mike Kahler* now pro at Sioux Falls, S.C., Westward Ho CC, succeeding Paul Wilcox.

How soon do replaced divots grow enough to repair their scars? Not nearly quickly enough, according to our observation over many years and courses.

The Japanese have the best way of repairing divots. The woman caddies carry little bags of soil fertilizer and seed that they apply to the divot scar promptly after it's made. This protects following players against bad lies. The divot soon is grown over. Daily divot repair in the severely scarred areas is standard operating procedure at most courses, but that shouldn't relieve a player of the obligation to temporarily replace the turf he hacked out or of repairing the depressions he's made on greens.

*Ken Johnson* from Colville, Wash., Elks CC to pro post at Sun Dance CC near Spokane.

Some superintendents are concerned that the recent lag in new course building is sharply diminishing the field for turf management school graduates, yet golf architects have plenty of business.

Modern Talking Picture Service, 2323 New Hyde Park Rd., New Hyde Park, N.Y., will loan free to clubs movies of Masters, Bob Hope Classics and Kemper Open tournament.

Club Managers Assn. of America is getting along faster than the Golf Course Superintendents Assn. of America and the Professional Golfers' Assn. in getting its members "certified" as formally meeting top job requirements.

*Bill Simmons* named professional and golf director at The Hamlet, Delray Beach, Fla. Joe Lee owns the course. Simmons moved from Connongate GC, Orlando, Fla., also owned by Lee.

*Hubie Smith* resigns pro job at Arnold Center GC, Tullahoma, Tenn., to be director of the \$500,000 World Open at Pinehurst (N.C.) CC in November this year.

*Bob von Hage* and *Bruce Devlin* designing second course for Sapphire Valley Inn, N.C.; also another for Doral at Miami. □