

What Are The Pros Buying For '74?

Although pros say they will be more cautious in their buying than last year, they generally are optimistic in their projections of 1974 sales. Investment cast clubs will dominate club sales and a return to traditional colors and styles in soft goods is predicted

EAST

by STEPHEN W. BYERS

NEW YORK—Asking Eastern golf club professionals to prognosticate on their 1974 buying is like asking a man carrying a heavy load for a match—their hands are full with the problems posed by 1973's badly depleted selling market.

In spite of this year's insufferable golfing weather, which left a "trail of tears" up and down the Eastern seaboard, there were still some professionals who would speculate on what 1974 would bring. Among those talking—caution is the watchword. Most Eastern professionals have lost that sense of well being that comes from putting a banner year under their belts and that induces a liberal wholesale buying climate. The invariable rhetorical answer to questions on '74 predictions runs something like this:

"After this year, wouldn't anything short of a deluge be an improvement?"

"Yes."

"But could you be a bit more specific? What does your experience and instinct tell you you may expect in '74—soft and hard goods buying trends

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CENTRAL

by BILL NICHOLS

CLEVELAND—Professionals here began buying for the 1974 season in September, but they are purchasing more cautiously than they did for 1973.

"I'm going to be more conservative in my buying," says Duff Lawrence, professional at the exclusive Canterbury GC, site of the 1973 PGA National championship.

"The economy has a lot to do with it. Members pay their dues, food and beverage bills and caddies before they buy golf clothes. Clothes are the last thing on the agenda. And when they buy, they'll get one sports coat instead of two or maybe two pairs of slacks instead of four.

"And still others, who aren't quite as clothes conscious, will wear last year's slacks," he continues.

Lawrence added that hard goods, club, bag and shoe sales, "have held their own this year, but soft goods have not gone as well as before."

While Lawrence thinks of the economy, Bob Hamrich of Mayfield CC, another one of Cleveland's more exclusive clubs, said the rain in April and

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WEST

by DON CURLEE

SAN FRANCISCO—The buying intentions for next season by professionals in Northern California are as varied as the stocks and suppliers.

Only the two darlings of latter-day golf shop merchandising are being cited by professionals in shops large and small, rural and urban, public and private—investment cast clubs and balls with new covers and dimple patterns.

In clubs, many professionals are counting on the new boost from graphite shafts and are looking to new, usually smaller manufacturers that are supplying custom-made and individually-styled woods and irons.

Even so, one professional at a long-established private club in Oakland, believes his members are confused by all the changes in club manufacture, shafts and specialty design. He will order more traditional lines for next year.

He admits that the newer club styles are selling well in his shop, but so are the traditionals. "I'm just not on the investment cast bandwagon," he says.

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and the like?"

"Well," says the Eastern golf professional, "my experience tells me to expect a better selling season every season. My instinct and natural optimism tell me I should buy heavily to meet and capitalize on that expected demand. Now, so much for experience, optimism and instinct. Sales this year are teaching me to heed my newly-acquired sense of caution, so that when I look at my racks and shelves in August '74, I don't have to wonder how to make room for '75 merchandise amid all the leftover stuff."

Unfortunately, this sense of caution has led many professionals (not only in the East) to drastically reduce their buying in women's soft goods. When a professional gets stuck with holdover merchandise, women's golfwear consistently has made up the major part of what he must live with during the next season.

Asked why women's golf clothes are always the holdovers, one pro says, "Well it's not just because I always over buy or necessarily buy wrong. The women's market has always been erratic, and golf fashions do not change substantially from year to year to meet women's appetites for the latest thing. It could be that the only way to consistently make money in women's soft goods is to pack a line of general sportswear like she sees at the big stores downtown. That's what she will buy the most of each year; I might as well stock it."

Many Eastern pros are using this same philosophy in their buying of men's wear, reasoning that traditional golfwear is a year or two behind general sportswear style innovations. "My members more and more are wearing active sport clothes on the golf course. Some are even giving up golf shoes in favor of sneakers and boating shoes; so this year for the first time I'll try a more liberal assortment of active sports shirts and slacks. They're after clothes they wear for other occasions besides golf."

One professional said he made the rounds of the downtown department stores and decided to stock several of the new men's car coats with this year's wider lapels in Donnegal tweed and some of the new high-styled reversible trench coats and wool ties. "Many members have complained that I stock only traditional golf merchandise. One woman even said that if I'd stock some

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May caused a drop of sales in his shop.

Reece Alexander, owner-professional of suburban Legend Lake CC, says that business has maintained a fairly steady pace.

The public courses are having a different problem. "Caps, hats and visors have sold pretty well," says John Peters, head man at Seneca, one of Cleveland's top public courses, "but golf club sales have dropped off drastically.

"The discount house, which advertises in the sports pages, are taking the business," he declares. "People also are buying pro-type golf balls there much cheaper.

"We get 1,500 or 1,600 players on weekends, but they're buying their equipment at the discount house.

"It's funny, but I know a man who went down to Puerto Rico and paid \$5 for a golf hat and then complained about paying \$2.50 up here for the same thing, but with a different decal.

"I think there is a trend now and I'll buy accordingly."

Reece Alexander, whose membership at Legend Lake is made up of high middle class, says that sales are cyclical. "It's always been like that for us," he points out. "We're just in our fourth year at our club and we enjoy moderate sales.

"Soft goods are holding their own. People are going to polyester and cotton blends more and more. Wool, of course, is out, but the doubleknits are doing well.

"We don't have a large female membership, so, of course, we don't stock heavily in their clothes," he adds.

"There aren't many people anymore who dress to kill. They wait all week for Saturday and when it arrives, all they think about is teeing up the ball, but because of this, our glove business is pretty good. Nothing spectacular, but good.

"However, I always believe if you get the traffic you'll get the business. I bought a little heavier this year and I'll probably buy about the same for next year, in soft goods anyway," he adds.

The bossman at Legend Lake had a good start this year in hard goods, but sales tailed off somewhat. "The way we began I thought it would be spectacular, especially in clubs, but it hasn't been that way," Alexander says.

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In soft goods he expects to stock more in men's wear and considerably less for the women. The women seem more inclined to buy their apparel at nearby stores, but the bigger his inventory of men's wear, the more he sells.

However, he expects the prices of imported items to go even higher and cited cashmere as an example. Except as a specialty item, cashmeres have almost priced themselves out of his market.

Another private club professional, who is bullish about soft goods, expects wools to make a strong comeback for fall, based mainly on the outstanding colors and patterns available.

He is so excited about the possibilities in apparel that he has hired a former clothing store employee to help customers with selections and fit and for buying. In spite of poor golfing weather, February was the biggest month of his professional career, and much of the lift came from clothing, so it is not surprising that he plans to expand his lines, even to ties to go with the sports coats, dress shirts and street shoes he has been selling.

At the public courses, enthusiasm for soft goods seems to be waning, but the excitement over clubs, balls and shoes (and to some extent, bags) is growing.

"We're getting away from soft goods," says one public course professional. "Most of us professionals really don't know much about soft goods. It's tough to compete with the clothing stores. We should stick to clubs, balls and accessories."

He expressed some skepticism about the graphite shaft, remembering the strong demand that once existed for aluminum shafts. "The next thing you knew, you couldn't give them away," he says. He'll buy cautiously in this area.

"Socks, shoes and windbreakers are our limit now," says another public course professional. We tried one of the top apparel lines once, but the competition with the shopping centers and downtown clothing and department stores was too much."

Because of heavy play by youngsters and learners at his course, he will stock a supply of starter sets for next year, low-priced clubs to help beginners on their ways.

He's looking for good movement among the top line clubs next year and

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V-neck sleeveless sweater vests, she would guarantee to purchase four, provided I stocked a color variety. I guess I'll take a word from the wise.

"Everyone is stocking a generous supply of those heavy wool socks in solid green, blue, black and red, which they all ran out of early last winter. And there seems to be a buying surge in the new tan windbreakers such as those popular on college campuses in the early '60s with the plaid flannel linings. I still have mine and have always enjoyed the great freedom of movement

permitted by the full saddle shoulder and the knit at the wrist that I could hike up my forearm and out of the way for playing comfort."

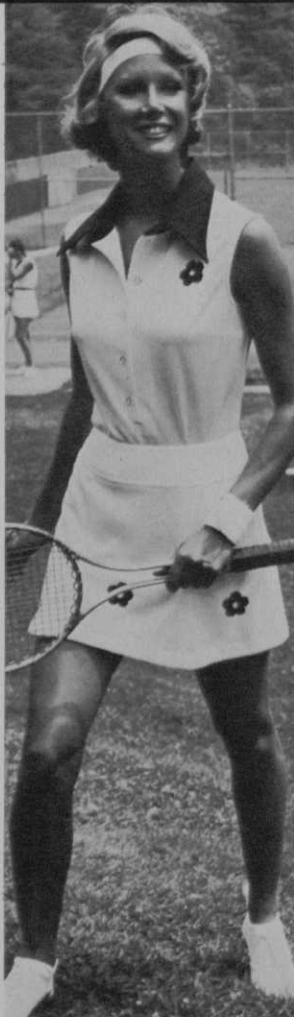
Disillusionment with the golf shoe business seems to be widespread among Eastern professionals. Shoes have always been hard to stock because of the wide size variation, and most of the high-end line golf shoes sold in pro shops are of the best quality and need replacing only every five years or so. Several pros told this reporter after some disheartening experiences with slow delivery and defective merchan-

dise, they were thinking seriously of bailing out of the shoe business altogether in '74.

Professionals uniformly praised the investment cast clubs and the balls with the Surlyn covers and new dimple configurations. Less enthusiasm was shown for the graphite shafts, but that is only because of the expense of stocking them, as they certainly are not volume sales items. Many pros have high hopes for the graphites once the price comes down. Bag sales were spotty in '73, and pros are going to be cautious in their '74 buying. One professional on Long Island put the problem this way: "I sold a bunch of low-line vinyl bags a few years ago. They were easily ripped in the golf cars and the straps were sure to break in a year or less. The word spread through my membership that the cheap bags were a bad deal and now I sell the expensive leather bags almost exclusively. The only problem is these high line bags are good for 15 years of hard use. So much for bags as a regular sales item."

It occurs to me that if Eastern golf professionals are not all cautious about the same items, 1974 will have to produce some winners. □

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"And when you think about it, you'll never find a great splurge in private clubs. In my club, at least, it's more steady than spectacular."

Mayfield's Bob Hamrich said that the past two seasons have been below the previous norm in sales and claims the spring rains dealt a powerful blow to business this year.

"It's been a bad year," says Hamrich. "I'll cut down on everything for next year. The rains in April and May washed us out."

About the discount house, Hamrich says, "The competition is great, but the pro shop is still 'available.'"

"I'm going to buy less clothing. Slacks and sweaters didn't move well this year, but golf balls, clubs and bags were okay."

"The light steel shafts sold fairly well," he adds.

What about the new graphite shafts. "Nothing much there yet," replies Hamrich.

Lawrence, who had a much different year than his fellow professionals because of the PGA championship, does not necessarily see a trend.

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