

# Cars-Make Them Mandatory?

Freedom of choice to walk a golf course could conceivably be a thing of the past at many courses around the nation, if a new look at golf car use is adopted by some clubs.

Mandatory car usage policies are already in effect at several operations and management swears increased car usage will speed play and hike use of fleets. One of the current examples of the plan in action is at the All Seasons Country Club in Lake Ozark, Mo.

Gary Grigg, superintendent of golf and grounds at the Robert Trent Jones-designed course, says mandatory golf car usage expedites play, overcomes the rugged terrain and generates more income.

The heavily-wooded 6,600-yard course cost \$1 million, took three years to build and is in its second year of operation. It is adjacent to the Lodge of the Four Seasons luxury-resort and the Land of the Fifth Season land development.

Grigg states it would be virtually impossible to walk 18 holes because of the course's rugged terrain. Even if a player were able to walk the hilly course, he added, play would become bogged down because of the time involved.

"We don't allow transient (public) business," Grigg remarked, "but our course receives pretty heavy play anyway. We've been averaging almost 75 rounds daily with play moving along at a steady clip."

On a national average, the bespectacled superintendent said, less than 40 percent of players rent golf cars. He believes mandatory golf car usage could expand any course's annual round capacity by 15 percent.

"I'm not talking about packing players in like sardines," Grigg said. "I'm talking about generating more rounds of golf than could be accommodated without mandatory golf car usage — and at a more comfortable pace."

Play is limited to Fifth Season property owners and Lodge of the Four Seasons guests. Fifth Season residents presently are charged a \$10 golf car rental fee for 18 holes plus an annual \$100 greens fee. Lodge guests pay \$15 per 18-hole round,

including greens fee and car rental.

"Golf cars are a highly profitable part of our over-all operation," Grigg said. "Figuring two persons per golf car, we automatically receive 50 cents in car rental for every dollar made in greens fees."

Without the compulsory golf car requirements, and assuming the course's ridership rate would not have exceeded the national average, Grigg's fleet of 76 cars would have brought in \$15,000 less income last year. The figure is based on 6,200 actual rounds after the course opened last July. The hypothetical difference between the mandatory requirement and voluntary ridership would be slightly more than \$50,000 in 1976, based on 20,900 projected rounds. Translated another way, Grigg noted, the mandatory golf car policy will enable the course owners to pay off its \$100,000 fleet investment within 24 months of its five-year financing plan.

"Gary plans on getting seven years out of our fleet," Fred Davis, vice president and general manager of the lodge, commented. "So, with the exception of preventive maintenance and refurbishing expenses, the last five years should be clear profit."

Davis said car rentals and greens fees should contribute one third of the course's projected gross revenue. Other revenues will stem from the clubhouse and pro shop operations. Davis did not reveal his operational budget forecasts, but said the golf operation will produce a "very nice profit."

Equally important, he said, the course indirectly aids ownership's bottom line figure by drawing more guests to the lodge. Davis offers three-day golf packages to broaden the lodge's appeal outside its traditional six-state market. The course also will be the keystone in selling the first-phase of a condominium project to start later this year.

Jones' selection as designer and the mandatory golf car policy both evolved from a comprehensive study of more than 50 resort-owned courses, including the Boca Raton Hotel & Club, Marco Island and

Sea Pines Plantation. Ownership developed a five-year "game plan" with monthly projections based on answers to questions ranging from fleet management to locker rental rates.

Bill Stacey, the All Seasons club professional, anticipated some difficulty last summer in convincing players to accept compulsory golf car rental. His apprehensions have since disappeared.

"If anyone catches flak it's me," Stacey said. "I rent the cars so I'm on the firing line. Ninety percent of the people don't comment. The first-time guest is the only guy who grumbles."

However, Stacey added, once guests play the course they realize that walking it would be an Everest challenge. He said property owners realize car rentals and profitability are vital to maintaining the first-class golf facility.

"Sure a few of them would like to drive their own golf cars," Stacey said. "But most of them are successful or retired businessmen who know the score." Golf cars at All Seasons are confined to a continuous eight-foot-wide limestone path. The path will be paved next year at an estimated cost of \$50,000. "The path has been worth its weight in gold," Grigg said. "It eliminated unnecessary wear to our turf and helped the course get off to a good start last year."

Grigg said it costs about \$20,000 a month to maintain the course in peak season. Without mandatory car usage and an all-weather path, he said, maintenance costs could average five percent higher. "We'd either have to raise our greens fees or settle for less than a first-class operation," the superintendent said. "It's that simple."

Furthermore, Grigg observed, the paths save money because riders are less likely to damage golf cars. He said annual non-mechanical repairs to the fleet have averaged less than \$10 per car.

"I think mandatory golf car rental will become the rule rather than the exception at resorts," Grigg said. "The policy makes just too much sense to be ignored any longer." □