



Million Dollar Pro Shop

Stocked to the Rafters

West Hills' pro shop is not your standard Horatio Alger story. Fourteen years ago, the Evanko family took 15 sets of clubs and started a shop, that just last year, grossed over \$1-million in sales.

Situated in suburban Pittsburgh in what brother Bob Evanko terms, "the deep woods", West Hills has to be one of the largest operations in the country. Its inventory bears this out.

For starters, the shop carries a standing inventory of between \$200,000 and \$400,000. There are a 1,000 sets of clubs, 2,000 pairs of shoes, nearly 1,000 golf bags and 1,000 dozen balls.

Those mind-boggling numbers are distributed in five separate buildings that the Evankos use to store their merchandise, a couple of which are family residences.

Initially, there is a pro shop that covers 900 square feet, but if you

make the trek to West Hills, you'd find a supply of headcovers in a kitchen, bags in an attic, carts in the fruit cellar and \$25,000 of assorted merchandise in a laundry room.

"We use all the available space we can get," said Bob Evanko, "And we need it, there is just so much here." How everything got there started in 1961, when Bob and his twin brother Dick and their other brother James pooled their savings to build their parents a par-three course from an old farm they owned.

Working seven days a week, often 14 to 16 hours a day, for two years, the family built the course. All three of the brothers worked part-time on the project, since their full-time jobs as civil engineers filled a regular part of their days.

Eventually, the project was completed and the pro shop evolved. At first, the brothers were unsure about

what to buy or how to get started, but through hard work and a trial-and-error attitude, the shop began to stockpile merchandise and get a name in the area, but even that wasn't easy.

"We have always dabbled in a small amount of local advertising and it wasn't any different when the course got started. We got some posters printed up and went around to about 75 stores, asking if they would put them up, so people would know where we were," Evanko said. Besides the poster parade, the course took ads out in the local daily newspapers.

To say that West Hills is crammed with merchandise would be an understatement. A look around the premises will provide a customer with just about every brand of club on the market. There are 31 in all and 48 different models.

If a customer finally makes up

their mind on a set, the West Hills staff proceeds to fit them. This process can go on for as long as the customer wants, says Evanko. "There was a case once in which a fellow spent eight hours in here for a fit." Usually, though, the average sale runs 45 minutes to an hour.

One area that West Hills prides itself on is the stocking of special orders. For instance, the shop carries a complete line of left-handed equipment in all price ranges along with extra-long clubs.

Providing good service and selection have been the watchwords at West Hills from its inception and Bob Evanko insists if there is a formula to success, that has been it.

"There have been plenty of people and salesmen alike who have walked into the store and tell us they have never seen a place so well-stocked. We can't really make it look neat. There's no way. But, we can take care of our customers and I think that's the most important thing," the 41-year-old remarked.

Over the last three years, West Hills' gross sales have increased steadily and now with the addition of a nationwide mail order business, optimism is up for even more volume. There has been a dramatic increase in sales since 1972 when the shop grossed \$300,000 and a year later \$550,000.

Heralded with advertising in both consumer golf magazines, West Hills' mail order business started in March, 1974. At first, the additional business put a strain on the shop's 10-person staff and once the brothers were holed up in the shop until 4:30 a.m., catching up on orders. Today, things are settling down.

"To keep pace with the market and your customers," says Bob Evanko, "it takes countless hours of work. There are special services that you have to conduct for your customers all over the country. Unless, someone devotes themselves to this business, they will not succeed."

Not a real player of the game, Evanko styles himself as an expert on club lines and their complexities. He claims there is a lot more to the golf business than most people think. To back those words with action, the Evankos spend a large portion of the shop's unique 84-hour week, right there.

Open seven days a week from 8

a.m. to 10 p.m., the shop is closed only on three holidays a year. With the mail order business all geared up, West Hills has 10 regular phone lines open to handle its business.

Orders come in from all over the country and some from all over the world. Merchandise has been shipped to India, Japan, West Germany, Belgium, Spain and Indonesia.

Ordering is a critical part of the business and West Hills works hard to make the right decisions. Bob and Dick both figure the orders along with the shop's director of operations, Richard Macey. Often, the Evankos face unacceptable shipping dates, but it's part of life.

"The trouble with shipping merchandise to us, is we're a seven-day a week operation and these factories run on a five-day week. A lot of times, that hurts us," he added.

Pricing policies have changed over the years for West Hills. At the beginning, to compete, the shop priced lower than its rivals. Today, though, the West Hills price is, in some cases, higher than the competition. This explains the fact why the shop hardly ever features sale merchandise or nominal discounts.

To make it in business, there has been personal sacrifice from the Evankos. Over a 15-year span, Bob admits that he never has gotten to watch much television or enjoy a lot of the better things in life, like an extended vacation.

"I just hope that anyone thinking about starting a shop of our scope, realizes it will take an awful lot of work. You just have to stick with your business to make it go. There's no easy way. A business has to be tended to, all the time," Bob Evanko insists.

It was probably a gamble 14 years ago for the family to go out on a limb and buy more than they could really afford to pay for, but the Evankos contend that's the only way to build up a good inventory.

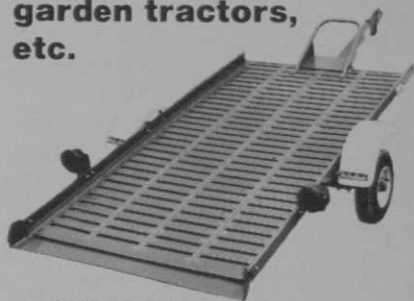
Out of an old farm they carved a golf course, where 20,000 rounds are played annually, built a pro shop now worth a \$1-million and have since started a nationwide mail order business. It seems like a look at the American work ethic in action.

If there is such a thing as a total golf shop, that's what the Evankos want West Hills to be. □

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