

# The Soft Goods Rainbow: Many Pros Never Find It

Soft goods in the pro shop — even though the situation is becoming more predictable as the pro becomes more professional — are still hard to peg. There is no across-the-board, easy way to characterize the typical pro shop soft goods operation. They can make or break the pro. One pro might say soft goods are the greatest thing that ever happened to him as he makes a handsome profit turning his inventory three times a year. Another might develop an ulcer just about the time he realizes in August he is never going to sell the merchandise that has been on the racks since April. And there are a lot of pros in-between.

There are contradictions even among the manufacturers — the people who have to make it their business to understand the pro and his country club setting. Consider these two statements, both made by manufacturers:

"With the trend to better educated pros from college and not the caddie ranks, today's pro is more fashion-oriented. He is more versatile, more ambitious and has broadened his business outlook past golfing. He is being educated by trained pro salesmen and PGA seminars, and is better for it."

And:

"The pro is one of the laziest merchandisers in the clothing business. Seventy percent of our orders come in from pros who have not even seen the lines. Many pros need help badly, but because of their pride are afraid to ask for it."

Others stress that the pro is not a merchandiser and some worry about being too sophisticated in dealing with him. One manufacturer said 70 percent of the business is done by 30 percent of the pros, which does not say much for the majority of the pros around the country.

The market is out there — \$60 million by one manufacturer's estimate. It is a market stimulated by the upsurge in men's fashion-consciousness of the last 7-10 years, and, not strangely, by the coverage of golf on color television in that same time period.

Also, manufacturers say it is a more competitive market than ever before. They say the club members buy the clubs and balls the pro pushes, but that they buy the golfing apparel that has status and that they like. This makes for a competitive atmosphere in the soft goods lines, possibly more so than between the different clubs and balls carried by the pro.

What are soft goods really worth to the pro? Some pros view it as the elusive part of their operation in which many of them find themselves trapped into overordering only to find what was bought is out-of-style almost by the time he gets it on his shelves. Then there is the other side of the coin. One pro GOLFDOM spoke with was so excited about apparel possibilities at his club that he has hired a former clothing store employe to help customers with selections and fit for

buying. And he plans to expand his soft goods stock along with this.

DiFini's Jack Lust said clothing distributors are no longer in a position to cater to individual salesmen such as the pro, and that sport fashions can only be handled through small boutiques and pro shops. "With the increasing self-service trend, the buyer likes shopping at his leisure and personal attention, such as he gets in a country club setting."

Lust goes on to say that there is also added snob appeal for the golfer, especially a woman, to say she bought her clothing at a pro shop. Another manufacturer said that in addition to this, there is the situation that many country club members are charging off some of their country club expenses to a corporation, and that this is an easy way to pay for clothing from the pro shop.

"The pro shops can be successful because the kind of clothing they handle appeals to a more mature clientele, with more mature figures," Lust told GOLFDOM. "The women especially appreciate the selection of fashion available to them with a fuller cut that they find in pro shops. This is an emphasis that the commercial lines cannot afford to style for because it is not in the all-important 23-30 age bracket styling."

Does the pro mind handling soft goods? Some say it takes time away from them doing what they were hired to do for the club as a pro — give lessons, schedule tournaments,

set up games between members, not to mention keeping their own game in shape. Others say it has made the modern pro take one step ahead of his predecessors — they are more affluent, closer to the lifestyles of their members at a private club, and do not have to hustle games on the side to make ends meet.

John Boucher, assistant pro who handles soft goods at Williamamantic Country Club in Connecticut, said: "Soft goods started out to be an added incentive to supplement a pro's income, but at certain clubs it has become the whole thing. It all depends on the members; if they want a soft goods man then that is what he does. If they want a player, that has to be his concentration."

Jack Webb, pro for eight years at Wakonda Club in Des Moines, Iowa, said about 20 percent of his pro shop business is in soft goods. "We handle everything, but not that much in any one area," he told GOLFDOM. "It is always nice to make a profit, but in many areas it is more of a service to members than anything. More and more you have to deal in services, and this is one of them. If the shop looks full, the members like it, and you are bound to make some money and keep them happy at the same time."

There is a lot of talk among pros of the fickleness of women when it comes to selling them soft goods. Women's apparel can even bring down an experienced merchandiser.

"The greatest problem in the women's market is fitting," DiFini's Lust said. "The reason for this is that most women lie about their size. This type of vanity is the big problem. But once the pro becomes familiar with basic proportions and forgets the women's mystique, he will be better able to fit and please women more accurately." Lust said his advice to handle the women's market is for pros to take an adequate inventory position, hire a business- and fashion-oriented lady and make her responsible. It takes a woman to sell a woman, Lust says, and Ernie Sabayrac would not disagree with that. For years Sabayrac, the pioneer in the soft goods field, has stressed his "gal in the shop" theme to help pros, almost to the point where most pros cringe when they hear the adage. But manufac-

turers and pros alike say that it works in the women's market.

"The woman is a member of the club," Sabayrac told GOLFDOM, "and the pro cannot bypass her. Women buy much more merchandise than men, and they buy it from other women. No retail store would rely on men to sell women, and neither should pro shops. It is not the merchandise itself that sells, but the female approach. Too many hard-headed pros do not realize that they have to give the same attention to women at their club that they do men. And that attention has to be given by a competent woman who is given an incentive to do well. She should be given responsibility, and it will free the pro to be a pro."

There are good reasons soft goods have become so predominant in the last few years; it is not something that was forced upon the pro. One reason is that golfers, even the most affluent ones, do not usually buy new clubs each year. Thus, a shop needs to deal in disposable items that turn over more frequently, and soft goods are a natural. Also, it is hard to pump up new selling points for clubs each year, but there is always something different in apparel to get the person in the shop and interested.

One pro said variety is more important than depth in selling members; you have to keep the shelves full. He said if you want a woman to come in and look around you have to make her feel there is a lot there, and that it is all different. He added to this that perhaps the club should help the pro absorb the burden of keeping a full inventory of stock. Why should the pro get stuck with the problems that come from the fickleness of members to always want what is the latest style? After all, clubs do not make superintendents bring their own equipment to jobs, and the same for club managers in the clubhouse. But the same pro admits that if this was the case, it would be much easier for the club to stock the shop, hire a salesperson, and leave it at that. This would cut the pro out altogether from shop profits.

Clubs do help subsidize the pro in a way. Two things he has going for him are free rent and a captive audience, a core of potential buyers



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David Crystal's Abruzzo: "The pro has to keep current and know his customer in this captive setting. His clientele does not vary, but they will only buy once if they get what they think is not a fair deal or good merchandise. Then the captive market works against the pro."



David Smith's Robert Smith: "More and more you see that people buy the equipment their pro pushes, but they buy the apparel they like based on fashion or price. The soft goods market is very competitive, with these points to contend with."

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that most likely are going to be exposed to what he has to offer.

"There has been tremendous improvement, but the pro is not yet a merchandiser," says Michele Abruzzo, David Crystal's advertising director. Crystal is most notable to the pro for its Izod and Haymaker lines. "The tremendous advantage of being a pro in the soft goods business is the captive market," she said. "The pro has to keep current and know his customer in this captive setting. He has to keep contemporary. His clientele does not vary, but they will only buy once if they get what they think is not a fair deal or good merchandise. Then the captive market works against the pro."

Bob Hamrich, pro at Mayfield Country Club outside of Cleveland, said: "My membership is pretty constant, the same people pretty much support me every year. There are advantages and disadvantages to this type of situation. I cannot increase business very much, but I can be more efficient because I pretty much know what to buy and what will sell."

Some old-time pros feel the merchant princes have taken over. They say the pro has no time for teaching because he is so busy selling soft goods. In many cases, assistants do all the teaching while the pro keeps track of his inventory that he might have \$20,000 invested in. Can he afford to worry about teaching, when at best it might only net him \$2,500 a year? At a private club, it is hard for a pro to get away with it for very long. Members resent it when he pushes sportswear too hard and as a result neglects the golf end of his business.

Jack Clark, pro at Gowan Golf Club in Mount Clemens, Mich., said that in some cases pros have gone too far in becoming soft goods specialists. "There are a lot of discounters around here, and it is hard to think of making a lot of money in clubs because the dollars are just not there. Anything you sell in clubs is from a loyalty basis, because members around here just buy what is the cheapest. But in soft goods there is a little more opportunity. I am not saying that it is necessarily good to get too deep into soft goods

at the expense of being a pro, the rest of the business should not suffer."

Don Essig, pro at The Hoosier Links, New Palestine, Ind., said there may be some soft goods specialists at resorts, but the ones who concentrate on apparel at other clubs are the ones who are wondering why their golf business is going down the drain. "The pro had better make sure his shop looks like a pro shop and not a haberdashery," Essig told GOLFDOM.

The golf apparel industry is very fashion-oriented, according to manufacturers. David Smith designer Eric Jacobson said: "Fashion is very important, much more so now than ever before. But as a designer I have to balance between fashion and function when designing a line for the pro shop. I try for the best look I can develop, but I also have to design for the game being played. There has to be an equal balance between the two."

There is much profit and turnover in soft goods because of the fashion aspect. Manufacturers recommend if a pro had trouble getting reorders last year at the peak of their season, that he should consider his present inventory, then take a heavier position on his opening inventory so it will last longer through the season. No apparel manufacturer that has had real success with



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its line in the pro shop can deliver later in the season with the colors and sizes a pro reorders. Ninety percent of pro shop sales have to come out of the stock on hand and not out of some manufacturer's bin.

Gowan Golf Club's Clark says, "In this area, our main problem is the short season, May through September. Getting anything in the way of a reorder is very difficult. If you do have something that is selling good, it is virtually impossible to get a reorder until the season is over. I definitely buy in the fall for spring, and do not really plan on reordering heavily."

Mayfield Country Club's Hamrich said: "Women's soft goods is probably the toughest because of fashion, the men's market is more stable. The ladies come out in the beginning, pick at it and leave it there. The men don't care if Sam comes out wearing pretty much the same thing they have on, but the ladies want something nobody else has. And it will always be this way, it is part of being a golf pro."

Forty to 50 percent markup is the rule at most clubs. In some areas and situations, it can be higher or lower. The markup is generally higher for women's than men's clothes, because of the more frequent markdowns from a faster fashion cycle.

Shoe sales can be a very profitable area for the pro. Shoe sales generally go in cycles, according to when the bulk of members last bought shoes and depending on popularity of styles that year. Business might be up 20 percent one year, level off the next and continue that up-and-down trend. Ernie Sabayrac representative Jerry Townsend, who works the northern Ohio area, said his five biggest shoe accounts are at daily fee courses, and he says the reason for this is even golfers who do not belong to private clubs are interested in the kind of quality shoe the golf pro can offer.

Nationally last year, shops grossed an average of about \$36,000, according to a GOLFDOM survey. And soft goods were steadily gaining as a part of total shop income. Two years ago, gross shop sales were over \$300 million total, with a 16 percent increase to \$34.5 million for men and a one percent



increase to \$29.4 million for women. At private clubs, men's apparel average sales of \$5,800; women, \$4,900; and shoes, \$2,500. Shoes nationwide did \$22.8 million, gloves \$18.2 million. Twenty percent of shops said they sold tennis wear, and averaged about \$1,300 a shop, or \$2.1 million nationally.

The soft goods market has just really become sophisticated in about the last 15 years. Just after World War Two it was some golf salesmen who started gathering at Dunedin, Fla., where the PGA winter tournaments were held. They sold off tailgates. More salesmen came every year. In 1961, they put up a tent to sell from under. They moved to Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., from 1965 to 1973. They used to require that a company had to have a national sales force to exhibit, and a four-booth maximum was in effect. But as golf business increased at shops, so did the number of companies servicing the pros, and restrictions were gradually raised.

Although it is the biggest merchandising event of the year, few pros actually wait for the PGA Merchandise Show to buy for the season. This is because it is often difficult to get orders before the season starts. But the average pro who did buy something at the show said he bought over \$6,000 worth of goods. About 84 percent, according to a GOLFDOM survey, said they bought items at the show they had not planned, so impulse buying is in effect and used by manufacturers. The pros generally regard the show as an opportunity to pin down fashion trends and do comparison shopping. Also, there are many show specials, closeouts and new merchandise introduced by manufacturers at the show.

"I like the show because it is easy to compare what all the manufacturers have to offer," Wakonda Club's Webb said. Gowan Golf Club's Clark said: "I have been to the show only once, but with our season opening March 15 it is just too late to do ordering for the season." The Hoosier Links' Essig said: "I went to the show one time, but it is mostly for people looking for bargains, because the manufacturers are trying to get rid of the stuff. I try to have my apparel for the season in the shop by Christ-



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mas, and the show is just too late for me. And when I did order from the show, I only got 40 percent of what I ordered. When I order in fall, I get 80 to 90 percent of what I order."

Mayfield Country Club's Hamrich said he uses the show. "It is important for me to get new ideas. When I go down to the show I am looking for new things and anything that I forgot. I know what I have ordered and I know what I need from the show." Hamrich also goes to New York once or twice a year to see what the manufacturers have. He goes in February or March to see how his orders are doing. If an order of his has been cancelled by a manufacturer due to lack of other orders, he reorders then.

David Smith's Robert Smith said the merchandising show is important because of the opportunity to pick up new business. But he also believes "you do business with people on their home base. Many companies do not look at it this way. We do not go to shows with an eye to volume."

Ed Manley, president of E. J. Manley Co., Pittston, Pa., said: "I

think the show would be more helpful if it was held at a different time in a different place." He suggested that since most pros who attend are from the Midwest a site like Chicago would be perfect. He also suggested the show be held in September, because this is when the pros are buying for the season.

As mentioned before, the market is competitive. General Mills recently acquired Foot-Joy shoes, and it already had Crystal with Izod and Haymaker in its stable. Colgate-Palmolive Co. reportedly wants to get into the market, so this is no place for the weak, it would seem. There are also a lot of companies that try to get into the pro shop by exhibiting at the merchandise show, but this is their big push of the year. Ben Hogan has just recently become more strongly involved in the soft goods lines after years strictly in clubs. Charles Malitz of Hogan said: "We are small and finding out that there are many established names in the industry with reputations that have been earned. The going is tough and perhaps tougher than even the equipment business. But we have two sales forces, one for

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clubs and one for apparel, because we feel they are two completely different markets. To give the kind of service we think is needed, we believe two sales forces are important to give the pros the kind of expertise they expect."

Manufacturers say most pros still do not fully understand companies' problems in planning and manufacturing goods for the next season. The manufacturers have to have commitments 90, 120 and 180 days in advance in the fall for the lines for the next season.

DiFini's Lust said because of the specialized fabrics now being used in golf apparel, it is impossible for the manufacturer to stock basic cloths as he once did. This means the manufacturer must project his needs ahead of time, and this is why more pros need to take an earlier position on their inventory for the season. "If the pro has too many reorders, this means he did not buy enough the first time," Lust said. "The pros must realize the delivery problems we have. If hundreds of shops want the same merchandise at the same time, we just physically cannot get it all out. We base our deliveries on receipt of orders and credit performance of the buyer. Of course, an order seven months in advance from a deadbeat is still filed."

Gilison Knitwear President Sidney Gilison said: "Selling to the pro is tougher. We are used to shipping

large orders, and with the pro we are sometimes shipping only one or two sweaters. It all comes down to the dollar bill. We have some pros we have dealt with over the years that are as good as gold. But we still cross our fingers when we ship some orders and just hope that we are going to get paid. And this is even after a credit check."

Izod/Haymaker Pro Div. manager Adele McCarthy said of her company's 6,500 pro accounts, perhaps one percent are aware of manufacturers' lead-time problems. "Not all pros realize that we cannot deliver goods ordered December 1 on December 2. The situation is getting better though."

But Mayfield Country Club's Hamrich says, "It is probably impossible, but I wish the manufacturers could do more special ordering. It really hurts the small operator who cannot finance large amounts and has no room to get too much stock at one time. Sometimes I wonder why the shirt companies cannot do the same kind of delivering as shoe companies. I can get shoes delivered in 10 days. Maybe they cannot do it in shirts, but how about in a big-ticket item like sweaters? It is darn expensive to carry much over 50 or 60 sweaters. But all in all, the manufacturers have been very fair to me over the years."

The middleman in the relationship between manufacturers and

pros is often the sales representative. Sabayrac's Townsend is one of 45 Sabayrac reps, and has been with the company four years. He has 280 pro accounts. He has worked as an assistant and head pro, and also in a men's clothing store. He knows the soft goods business from both sides.

"I work off what the pro bought last season," Townsend told GOLFDOM. "The pros that are better buyers know what they bought and what sold the best. My biggest problem is from pros who are not sure what items sold the best for them." He said many pros do not realize they are in business, they think they are golfers first and foremost. "But he had better learn to merchandise. If a pro says he makes \$20,000, maybe \$15,000 of that is what he makes out his shop before expenses. The only way he can make a decent living is by sound merchandising."

Townsend explained he starts fresh in July with the following year's show line on his calls. He begins his sportswear line showing in August and runs through December showing it. He shows his third line in February and shows his fall line in April and May, and does fill-ins on all his trips. This is a total of four trips to most of his accounts during the year.

He said the pro buys for spring well, but is poor on fill-ins, what he calls "getting out of business." This means the pro does not keep a perpetual inventory to do business from. He said the pro has to have continuous merchandise throughout the year to do optimum business.

Townsend said many pros do not realize the business aspects of buying and selling. "Take a basic size run of \$300 worth of red sweaters," he said. "If the pro sells half of them, he should have taken in \$300 with his markup. It should cost him \$150 to replenish his stock, which puts him \$150 in the hole again. If he sells half of the sweaters again, he should again spend \$150 to keep his shelves full of that sweater. Only after he turns three times is he really in a profit position. Too many pros think that once they sell for 50 percent markup that is all profit. This is very far from the truth."

Another rep for a major manufacturer said the pro is inadequate in



1976 promotion pictures: Shots of DiFini's new line (left) and David Smith's (right). The market is estimated at \$60 million nationally, and is said by some manufacturers to be even more competitive than clubs and balls.

buying. "The pros really are not interested in learning," he said, "they say they are, but they really are not." Another rep said some pros will buy a pair of expensive shoes for themselves, but will not stock the same shoe for their members, because they are afraid of taking a chance.

And still another rep told GOLFDOM: "Every time I go back to a shop I have to resell most pros. Most pros are inadequate and vulnerable and won't admit it. I should not have to resell him, he should be running out to the parking lot with open arms when I drive up, because I represent money to him."

Very often, it comes down to one word — underfinanced. Take an example. A young assistant finally gets a top job at a club. He wants a \$25,000 inventory, and gets somebody from the club that is a banker or a friend to underwrite him and stock his shop. So he is \$25,000 in the hole before he even makes sale. If he sells everything, which is rare, he makes \$50,000. He should rebuy to keep his shop full to do business and keep his members happy. But it has been so long since he has had a new car, his wife wants a house, and he wants a vacation in Florida that he has never had. So he spends the money as it comes in. When next season rolls around he is in the same position of having to borrow more money rather than being in a position to finance himself. If he does things correctly, after one year he has made enough to pay off his note and a meager salary for himself. The second year is better, and the third year is the pivotal year when he should be backing himself. After five years he should be in a position to make a good living.

Townsend said of pros ordering ahead: "When I show lines I have a completion date as to when those lines can be shipped. From May through September. I can maybe ship three weeks from the order. But in October my completion date for sweaters might be something like November 30. This means some will be shipped sooner, but it is guaranteed that all will be shipped by the completion date. Many pros are afraid to project or make an investment ahead of time. I have one guy who buys 300 sweaters twice a year.

He tells me in May that he wants them shipped September 1, and I can guarantee that. But if a guy calls me up in October and wants them in three weeks, all I can do is tell him my completion date. The first guy is a professional buyer."

Are most pros doing the best job they can with soft goods?

Willimantic's Boucher: "I think most pros really don't do as good a job as they can, they need more education." Wakonda's Webb: "I think most pros are doing the best they can, around here anyway. Some get afraid of overbuying and come up short. There is however a definite lack of training especially in the ladies lines, and pros do get burned some time." Hoosier's Essig: "You really have two extremes of pros — the ones who are doing a good business, and the ones who say they cannot make money. The ones who say they cannot make money just don't know how to. The pros just have to be more business-like and keep better records and do better planning."

Mayfield's Hamrich said: "Many pros do not know what they have in the shop; it is so important to keep records and inventory. I do inventory each month and keep detailed records. I know the percentage of profit and loss for each item for the month broken down by item. I can tell you what I grossed and what I netted. And I can compare it with how I did last



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year. I never get beat too badly because I know what is and what isn't moving. I know where I have to come up with sales to move merchandise. Some pros cannot do this because they do not even know what they have."

How about the future of soft goods in the pro shop? The future depends on the individual pro, Hoosier's Essig says. The pro who does not spend the time and work at selling soft goods is losing out on a valuable source of income. Hamrich is not sure soft goods sales in the pro shop will increase. He is afraid of downtown stores and outlet houses loaded up with merchandise at cheaper prices. "My season is short, and I can hardly defend myself with only three or four months to sell. They can hit me early, during or after the season. They really don't care that much about us now, but if a big department store wanted to point, it could kill us."

Quantum's Dick Berman said the pro is going to have to face a tougher situation in the future. As he predicted a few years ago, with the imminent pro-only situation taking club business away from the pro, he is going to have to turn more and more to soft goods industry can do nothing but grow. And Crystal's Abruzzo feels "clothing is getting more expensive, but what it comes down to is that the people who always had money still have it and are willing to spend it. And most of these people belong to country clubs." □