

Don't push the pro out of the pro shop

by Charles A. Putsch



Today's golf course operation has been over-taxed, labor costs have risen while seemingly less work is performed for greater remuneration, and the equipment used for maintenance has increased in cost. This leads to the necessity for increased revenues from greens fees and, unfortunately, wherever else money seems available: snack bar or dining facilities, golf cars, and now segments of the golf professional's business.

Pro shop operations have generally been neglected and somewhat hit-or-miss operated by persons acting as professionals, but not necessarily performing as professionals. Now many course operators are taking segments of this business into the club operation. Cars went first, and now many pro shops are following.

Many new courses have been constructed, but the operators are not necessarily proficient in total business technique. Where a professional was hired, proper screening was not always affected and the results were not up to levels best for operations — thus tainting the professional golfer's image.

Outstanding examples of this demise in professionals' participation

can be noted on the west coast at Spyglass Hill, Cypress Point, and Pebble Beach: the elimination of three PGA professionals and the installation of one as director of golf. One pro was retained for other duties, and the third was released for a net loss of two pro jobs.

Another example is Pinehurst's operation under the corporate structure of big business. The pro shop and related business is course owned and operated, and the change of professionals has numbered nearly as the years since the takeover.

And very recently: the Cleveland Metroparks System, which includes six courses surrounding the city of Cleveland, Ohio, has eliminated four jobs where professional service is needed and replaced in most cases with potentially unqualified personnel. The term "unqualified" relates to persons not having the knowledge of merchandise, display, manufacturers and policies of purchase and/or returns, sales techniques with respect to golf equipment, and qualifications for teaching. Fortunately many of these persons holding the title of cashier-manager are players of sorts

and can move people on the course properly. But what will the lesser experienced public player do relative to further involvement in better golfing techniques, both for playing and purchase for play? Improvement in play relates to both instructional direction and equipment selection; golf equipment cannot be taken off the shelves as if one were in a supermarket.

Motivation makes money

While the three examples are widespread in type of operation, this was the intent: to show that any and all course operations can and will be affected if this trend is allowed to continue as in the last decade. Recently several private clubs have dipped into pro shop operations beyond the golf cars, and while compensation over a normal professional salary is evident, sales will decline eventually without personal motivation by the participant in the form of "profit from efforts commensurate with the effort."

All sales oriented persons will quickly reflect that no one will give constant effort at the peak level in sales work on a guaranteed remuneration factor, and sooner or later evidence of performance at purely acceptable levels will appear. Tragically, it is just human nature. But when the loss is to a board of directors and not just to the individual, actions will eventually be taken.

It is often stated that the operation of the pro shop in the name of the company, public facility, or membership has been taken over to insure that

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a more completely stocked shop, in items exactly desired by those purchasing, will be evident; however I feel that only a change of personal opinion will occur in most cases. This coupled with human nature and a probably less-aggressive professional or manager whose choice of merchandise has already been challenged, will result in a regression of business, and the loser will ultimately be the member, player, or public. Thus more and more off-course sales outlets will become the source of merchandise purchase and instructions.

Return on investment

The loss of the golf car concession took an area of higher profit with less time consumed from the professional's business, but generally some remuneration per cart has been conceded to allow participation monetarily in return for supervision of the operation. In the areas of the golf professional's stock in trade, however, (club repair, lessons, and shop merchandising) a new element is now evident — that of loss of merchandising privilege.

At one time, in order to become a



golf professional, one only had to state this desire and go to work at little or no pay under the supervision of an existing professional. After serving many hours and about 5 years' time supposedly learning clubmaking and repairs, getting along with the golfers, how to play and teach, and the merchandising evident at that time — one paid his dues and became a member of the Professional Golfers' Association. Many did not acquire all the knowledge needed, but still became a member. Others did justice to the professional positions, and in subsequent years a new image was sought and worked for under new requirements.

Today it takes in excess of 3 years' time, the same service under a

“Now many course operators are taking the pro shop into the club operation.”

qualified professional (there are exceptions to this), the acceptance of the Section of the PGA into the apprentice program, passing of tests upon completion of two business school conducted by the PGA and a playing test by the local section, and subsequently an oral interview after the allotted time lapse for each. This at various fees and expenses during the total program, which are born by the aspirant. While this very important step in a man's life has been concisely stated here, it is not easy, nor lucrative, and is basically the reason for this entire article.

A golf professional must wear many hats while plying his trade. He has to be a diplomat. He has to be a teacher. He must be able to arbitrate rules and situations. He has to be a technician of equipment, as related to the individual player. He must be a businessman and profitably buy, sell, and finance the operation without in-

curing disfavor of the customers. And all this time while working for a course operator — whether it be an individual owner or owners, a private club membership, a municipality or governmental agency, or a development-type facility with stockholders.

This is all done under a sliding hourly demand for his time, based on the section of the country relevant to weather and daylight at that time of year. It is difficult to work a time clock and be a golf professional — in fact it can't be done. A profitable operation is a well-run operation under the leadership of a qualified competent professional — not necessarily a PGA member, but most likely so — as this is the only area thus far in operation with proper background to perform in all phases of golf satisfactorily. Shortly to be added will be college facilities for even a more complete instruction along these lines. (Ferris State in Michigan is already in operation.) These will cut two-thirds of the time necessary to become a professional and yet acquire college training.

Pro as manager

The conflict of need for financing of the total operation by the various course governing bodies, as evidenced by the inclusion of parts formerly of the professional's business, has now introduced a management figure. If the professional is capable of management, obviously some increase in remuneration will occur, and probably for some period of time the pro shop will function profitably. If a manager is hired and not a professional, it is possible for the pro shop to function profitably, but surely the golfer will suffer for lack of detailed knowledge of golf. Generally this leads to turnover both in personnel and players, as there is no longer a common ground or incentive for the manager-player relationship. In due course, other various compositions will result in the overall business. This method might survive in a large complex, but not in a close-knit, small operation with limited memberships.

In general, it is evident that the golf professional is a needed buffer between managing bodies and the players no matter what type of opera-

tion is involved. The professional must have the age-old incentives necessary to conduct business smoothly and interestedly. These incentives are participation in golf car revenues, the pro shop, and lessons. Preferable is total consideration for pro shop and lessons, and partial for golf cars in order that responsibility can be delegated and performed.

The capability of the person performing as a professional is the responsibility of the Professional Golfers' Association of America through the educational services offered and demanded for this purpose. “The objects of the Association shall be to elevate the standards of the Professional Golfers' vocation; to promote interest in the game of golf; to protect the mutual interest of its members; to hold meetings and tournaments for the benefit of its members; to assist deserving unemployed members to obtain a position; to institute a benevolent fund for the relief of deserving members; and to effect any other object which may be determined from time to time by the Association.” (From the constitution of the PGA of America and quoted each and every month on page three of the *Professional Golfer*.)

The responsibility for obtaining the person acting as a professional is up to the committee determining which applicant is right for that particular position — without regard to getting the cheapest willing worker for any course operation.

A profitably operated pro shop and lesson tee will result in a satisfactorily operated golf facility with satisfied members or players willing to pay whatever price is necessary to competently operate the total enterprise. Members and players respond to successful business operation. Therefore the course owners, regardless of the type of facility, will profit in the overall picture.

If the PGA, whose creed is for the betterment of golf in general, and the individual course operators, with service and profit as motivations, truly apply sound business principles and work together diligently and harmoniously, there will emerge the caliber of truly professional representation which will live up to the image that both bodies desire. □