

Again, there is no real promotion effort much like many other daily fee operations. Brubaker relies on the yellow pages, general newspaper advertising, and some special events advertising, for example, on Mother's Day and Father's Day. "We also like to attract juniors and work very hard to get these kids out on the course," Brubaker mentioned. Hillcrest has a season ticket plan. Charges are \$70 for a single and \$120 for a couple.

Though he has no formal agronomy experience, Brubaker realizes

having someone around that does is essential. He has hired, over the years, several horticulture graduates from a nearby junior college.

W. G. Stevely, 64, is no stranger to the golf business. He took his farm in Salem, Ore., in 1962 and built his first nine holes. Nine years later, he took a little more of that ground and built nine more, finalizing his Battle Creek Golf Course at its present 18 holes.

With a season falling somewhere between 10 and 11 months, Stevely does his own bookkeeping and over-

sees an operation that includes a regular 44-seat restaurant plus a lounge. These two features produced more than \$125,000 in sales in '76.

With the nearest municipal course 50 miles away in Portland, Battle Creek has no worry here. Stevely is concerned about the skyrocketing taxes in Oregon, even with greenbelt. "If these taxes get any higher, I'll tear the course out and plant spinach," he says. "After 16 years, I enjoy the business. To be honest, though, I wondered why I got into it at first." □

GOLF BUSINESS PROFILE

Promotion and perseverance pay off for daily fee owner

by Marino Parascenzo

It's not a big creek, but you can't cross it without a bridge.

You cross the one-lane bridge — about 50 feet of wooden planking set on steel girders anchored to concrete abutments, their bulky shoulders holding everything about 5 feet above the clean water bubbling through an archway of trees — to get to Lindenwood Golf Course, a daily fee course near Canonsburg, in southwestern Pennsylvania. The bridge also, symbolically, carries you to Russ Wylie's way of thinking.

"We had to build that bridge," said Wylie, not in complaint, but in pain, "and we have to pay taxes on it, too."

In that one statement, Wylie wraps up the plight of the daily fee course owner: he's on his own, all the way.

Wylie, an activist among the nation's fee course men, owns Lindenwood, across that little bridge, and Rolling Green, another 18-holer about 6 miles away in the bumpy woodlands south of Pittsburgh. But owner for how long?

Two pressing factors raise that same question for fee course owners all over the nation, Wylie says. Those factors are real estate taxes, a common enemy, and the municipal course, a blood brother so favored by Marino Parascenzo covers golf and other sports for a Pittsburgh daily newspaper.

parent government as to be a downright prodigal son.

"These are not just Pennsylvania problems," Wylie said. "These are national problems." They are, he says, a threat to the very existence of fee courses.

His is not the cry of a solitary wandering soul whose wallet has been injured. At last fall's meeting of the fledgling National Association of Public Golf Courses near Chicago, Steve Alberg of the National Club Association issued a frightening report (GOLF BUSINESS, February 1977) — that 22 percent of the nation's clubs and courses are on the verge of liquidation due to the tax load.

Real estate taxes and municipal courses. At first glance, they may not seem to be related. But as Russ Wylie sees it, each has a hand at the throat of the daily fee course. The taxes squeeze from one direction. The fee operator could loosen that grip by raising his green fees. But the nearby municipal course, with its government-subsidized ability to charge lower fees and its freedom from those same real estate taxes, is squeezing from the other.

Wylie is doing more than wringing his hands. Eight years ago he helped form the Pennsylvania Golf Course Owners, Inc., of which he is a past



Russ Wylie ponders the plight of the daily fee owner-operator. In the background is the clubhouse of his Lindenwood Golf Course.

president. He is now director of the Northeast Region of the National Association of Public Golf Courses. The two organizations, though independent of each other, have the same goals — among other things, easing those grips.

"We're seeing these problems," Wylie said, "in San Jose, Pompano Beach, Chicago, all over."

On the subject of real estate taxes, Wylie has an unexpected and articulate ally in the renowned Alistair Cooke, television broadcaster, newspaperman, and author.

In his witty and wide-ranging foreword to the inspired *The World Atlas of Golf* (Random House, 1976), Cooke issued this forecast of doom:

"For the rest of us, this colossal book comes along, none too soon, to review the history of great golf architecture from its invention by Willie Park Jr. just before the turn of one century to its likely demise just before the end of the next. For in the United States at any rate, an amendment to the federal tax law, allowing the states to reassess land taxes according to the doctrine of 'best possible use,' could soon tax golf courses at either the real-estate or public rate and doom once and for all the private playground."

Cooke is speaking of stately country clubs. But if you interpret "private playground" to mean the golf courses of the nation's some 5.5 million daily fee golfers, the grim message is the same.

The inequities of taxation

What Wylie sees as the inequities of the real estate tax structure are brought into sharp focus just outside his front door. Not far from his Lindenwood course lies Valley Brook Country Club. Both are in Washington County, just south of Pittsburgh.

"Now, I have no dispute with Valley Brook," Wylie said. "But just use it for comparison purposes because this is not uncommon. Many of our association members (PGCO) are faced with the same problem."

Valley Brook spreads over some 300 acres, of which about 285 are used for its 27 golf holes, Wylie pointed out. Lindenwood has 258 acre, but only some 120 are used for its 18 holes. The rest stands principally in woodlands.

Both are taxed under the "best

use" doctrine. "We are assessed at \$250 an acre, even for about 138 acres of woods, and Valley Brook is assessed at \$290 an acre. Yet there is no comparison," Wylie said. "Lindenwood is a fine fee course, but there is no way in the world you can compare us with a fine country club like Valley Brook. Still, the tax rate is nearly the same."

The suggestion, of course, is not that Valley Brook be taxed more for its lush properties, but that both Valley Brook and Lindenwood be taxed less for their value to the people. In urban areas, Wylie argues, golf courses are among the last open green spaces that are becoming increasingly more important to the leisure and well-being of man in an industrialized, technological society.

A small ray of hope

Wylie draws hope for future tax relief from the fact that he did win one tax break, albeit a small one, 3 years ago. His Rolling Green course, also in Washington County but not in the same township as Lindenwood, was under a 10 percent amusement tax, an option of township governments.

"As I see it, an amusement is something you sit and enjoy, like a movie or a ball game," Wylie said. "Golf is not the same thing. It is something you do, a particular sport." One could argue with his logic, but not with the results.

"It was a one-year campaign," Wylie said. "We went to the township supervisors. Look, we said, business is not all that good to begin with. And now inflation is hurting us, costs are rising. Not only that, courses in other townships don't have an amusement tax. We finally persuaded them. The alternative? Well, to raise prices — and eventually price myself out of the market."

Wylie knows his golf market. Over the past 20 years he has ridden the golf boom from a tentative, speculative start to solid success, seen it grow, flourish, and now take its lumps.

A graduate of Grove City (Pa.) College, Wylie was in the retail dairy business when, as he put it, "I saw golf coming, saw the need for courses." In 1956 he started with Rolling Green's first nine holes, "... the first 9-hole course south of Pittsburgh," he recalls.

Today there are 100 daily fee

courses in Western Pennsylvania. "But only about 60 belong to our owners association," he said, with a trace of exasperation. "We're like all other organizations — you just don't get 100 percent cooperation. And I don't know why. I preach it all the time"

Unfair competition

If the tax problem is heavy, the problem of municipal course is no lighter. But it is more vexing because the muny courses have a strength far out of proportion to their number, like a small, powerful magnet in a sea of paper clips. They exert a restraining force on the market, Wylie says. The public golfer, like every buyer, usually goes for the best price. And the muny courses, because of their tax support, can charge the best price.

In the Pittsburgh area, the two major attractions are Allegheny County's 18-hole North Park Course and the 27-hole South Park Course, each set in vast parklands offering such other features as picnic grounds and boating.

Wylie, although looking for higher incomes, fears that his golfers may merely shrug and go a few miles up the road to South Park if he doesn't keep Lindenwood's prices competitive.

"The municipal course is one of the fee course's toughest competitor's," Wylie said. "To begin with, they don't pay real estate taxes. They are supported by tax money. And take labor, for example. We're lucky to be able to put four or five guys to work on a green. At South Park, they can put 25 or 30 on if they have to. Some of them may be brought over from the picnic groves or somewhere else."

It is of some consolation to Wylie that green fees are now up at the two Allegheny County courses, to \$4.50 on weekdays and \$6 on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays. "Still not realistic," he insists, "but an improvement."

Wylie charges \$5 and \$6 at Lindenwood. At his other course, Rolling Green, the fees are lower at \$4 and \$5 because it is hillier than Lindenwood and about 10 shots easier to the good golfer.

Wylie's postulation that muny courses govern the marketplace is, to some extent, borne out about 50 miles north of Pittsburgh. At New Castle,

Pa., Sylvan Heights, that city's municipal course, the fees are \$3.50 and \$4. Although Castle Hills, across town, challenges the point successfully with prices substantially higher, at \$4.50 and \$5.50, Ellwood City's semi-private Del Mar, in the other direction, is more in line at \$3.75 and \$4.25.

The fee course operator is practically helpless, Wylie admits, in trying to change the fee structures at many courses. A plea for an increase at North and South Park probably had little effect on the Allegheny County Commissioners, especially when one of the voices came from a different county. Their chief concern is their own taxpayers and golfers. The increase to the \$4.50-\$6 schedule doubtless was due not in response to the plight of private operators, but to the cold facts of running municipal facilities. Costs keep rising.

But they keep rising for the fee course operator, too. "A gang mower I bought when I started in 1956 cost \$1,800 new," Wylie recalled. "Today it costs \$5,600. My tractor was \$2,100 then, and it's \$6,000 now. Equipment costs have about tripled, and so have labor costs. But green fees have only doubled."

Basically, the area between receipts and expenses is profit, and that area is shrinking. "It's the old squeeze," Wylie said.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained

The challenge to real estate taxes might be met on a broader basis, even a national one, and that's where the National Association of Public Golf Courses comes in.

"We have attorneys doing investigative work on the possibility of tax reform," Russ Wylie said. "Something along the line of preserving open spaces. The only way for us here in Pennsylvania is to go before the state legislators with a bill on 'green and open spaces,' to try to preserve them for public use. You know, someday courses like mine here at Lindenwood might be a green space within a metropolis."

A quick tour of Lindenwood shows what Wylie means. Lindenwood's 18 holes roll gently, almost flat, through lush woodlands. It is clean, quiet land, still except for the songs of birds. At the northern edge, just through the

trees, you can make out the top of a water tower in the distance. It's the only sign of civilization.

Yet perhaps only a half-mile away are housing developments and multi-story apartments. A four-lane highway sweeps north and south less than a mile away, as the robin flies. The fringes of Pittsburgh's southern suburbs creep ever closer, claiming verdant open spaces with housing and shopping centers. It's a scene repeated throughout the nation.

"We need tax reform before taxes force owners to sell to high rise developments and housing developments," Wylie said. "Very few owners want to sell. They love the golf business and they enjoy it, like I do, and they want to stay in it. As long as they can make a profit."

The problems of real estate taxes and municipal courses rest principally with the joint efforts of the fee course owners. Meanwhile, Wylie is doing something about his own personal business — promoting golf, vigorously, on all fronts.

Wylie is a key force in the PGO — the Pennsylvania Golf Open, now in its fifth year. This is a better-ball-of-two tournament sponsored by the Pennsylvania Golf Course Owners, complete with qualifiers at some 20 participating courses throughout the state. At a cost of about \$300 each to the courses, the PGO put up a purse of a healthy \$8,000 in merchandise for prizes last year.

"We're hoping to build the PGO, and even to get a national tournament," Wylie said.

More ambitious and riskier is the "sweepstakes" promotion of the Western Pennsylvania courses, a no-strings-attached drawing for a whopping \$25,000 in prizes.

It is designed to attract golfers in September, October, and November. "This is the best time to play," Wylie said. "The weather is ideal and the courses are in the best shape."

The job was formidable — merely win golfers away from the Pittsburgh Pirates as they battled down the National League stretch drive, from the Pittsburgh Steelers as they fought unsuccessfully toward a third straight Super Bowl, and from the University of Pittsburgh and Tony Dorsett as they marched toward the national collegi-

ate football championship.

The plan was simple and effective. Anyone dropping in at a participating course could pick up a free drawing ticket. Nothing to buy, no golf to play. Half of the ticket went into the hopper for the drawing.

The idea was splendid. Unfortunately, the weather was not. Golfers came out in flocks, picked up their free tickets, but rain kept them off the courses.

First prize was a 1977 Dodge; second, a golf trip for two to the Bahamas; and third, a trip for two to Bermuda. Then came a parade of color television sets, pro line clubs and bags, and a landslide of green fee books.

For credibility, copies of the winning tickets—pages of them—are still posted at Wylie's two courses.

The cost was about \$1,000 for each of 19 participating courses. The sweepstakes is on again this year, although Wylie senses a certain disaffection in some corners. It seems the rainy weather of the fall of '76 dampened the enthusiasm of some owners.

"But I think it was worthwhile," Wylie insists. "Yes, I will go along with it again."

Wylie promotes his own courses just as intently. He encourages women's play by not restricting them to special hours, by forming ladies' leagues, and by staging a Ladies' Invitational tournament. And kids are more than welcome.

The huge Western Pennsylvania high school league, numbering about 100 teams, needs courses, private and public. Wylie wanted the fee course owners to offer their courses free.

"But some said no; we pay school taxes, so let them pay," he said.

"Years ago I gave my Rolling Green course free to five different schools. Then the other courses began to take teams. Now I have one team at each of my courses. Remember, these are our future golfers."

All of it — the fight against real estate taxes, the challenge of municipal courses, the promotions — are one man's campaign to make the fee course go. It's his own daily bread.

"I don't pretend to have the answers," Russ Wylie said. "But somebody's got to do something." □