



Make the most of your golf car investment

by Robert L. Balfour

Twelve years in the golf car business has taught me a number of valuable lessons. Here are the golf car policies I would follow if I owned my own golf course.

Should the golf cars be purchased or leased?

Irrefutable evidence exists dictating that I should buy and own my golf car fleet. My profits will be considerably greater through ownership. This is predicated on the fact I understand and would practice intelligent use, care, and maintenance on the fleet. Leasing is recommended only when:

1) A prestigious course doesn't want to be bothered with maintenance, wants everything perfect for its members, and doesn't care about making a net profit off its golf car operations.

2) The course is located a considerable distance from the golf car distributor and it is known several golf cars will inevitably be out of service for prolonged periods while awaiting either parts or service from the golf car seller. It is an unfortunate fact that some golf car distributors and some golf car manufacturers who sell

direct to courses owning their own cars are somewhat careless in providing parts and service, but respond much faster to service calls when cars are leased. The lessor is sharing in downtime losses on leased cars, but under ownership of the cars the distributor providing poor service loses only his reputation.

3) Everything I can beg, borrow, or steal has gone into the construction and development of a new golf course or resort operation and funds can't be found to pay for the golf cars. I would then have to negotiate a lease to carry me to a point at which I can afford to buy the golf cars.

I believe it is more important to weigh the reputation and location of the distributor providing parts and service than is the selection of a brand of golf car. I would take a second-choice golf car from a first-choice distributor before I would take a first-choice golf car from a second-choice distributor.

Should I buy four-wheel or three-wheel golf cars?

Determining factors are comparable pricing, possibility of lower insurance in the case of four-wheel cars, the terrain, the weight differentials, and ultimate trade-in values.

If there are any severe hills on the course, I would consider only four-wheel golf cars, as the added safety and stability of four-wheel golf cars is unquestioned and just one lawsuit can become very expensive. I would want to choose a four-wheel golf car having a gross operating weight of less than

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1,000 pounds. I would check with my insurance people to determine my insurance rates on four-wheel vs. three-wheel golf cars. I would consider that each tire on a four-wheel car will produce less tire compaction on the turf (total weight distributed on four wheels rather than three).

If I owned a course as flat as a billiard table, I would still insist on four-wheel cars if the price premium didn't exceed \$100 per car for the safety and stability of that extra wheel. Within the last 3 years the industry trend has been toward four-wheel cars, meaning the trade-in value 3 to 5 years from now would be greater for four-wheel cars.

Under whose responsibility would I place the golf car operations?

I know the rental of the golf car is one of the largest single sources of income available to me. I know the average pro shop throughout the U.S. last year had gross sales of \$37,989 while the average gross golf car rental income per club was \$40,588. It is obvious I want the golf car rentals promoted and merchandised with as much effort as goes into the sale of golf clubs, bags, balls, tees, shoes, clothing, etc.

I wouldn't allow my pro shop to be dirty, and by the same token I want every golf car to be clean and in proper working order each day.

While the golf professional makes a concentrated effort to promote and sell golf shop merchandise, I'm smart enough to know my golf car operation can be increased if I can gain total cooperation between my golf course superintendent, golf professional and his staff, and the club manager.

It is the golf course superintendent who has the responsibility for maintenance on my turf equipment, the course, and cart paths. He is generally more mechanically inclined than others on the staff. A golf car mechanic, under the supervision of the golf course superintendent, should be given the responsibility for golf car maintenance, daily cleaning, charging and watering of batteries, etc.

I want the golf professional and his staff to assume the responsibility for getting the golf cars to the first tee and having them returned to the shed after use. I want the golf professional to promote and merchandise the use of

the golf car as professionally as he does the pro shop operations. Each golfer should be asked if he wants to rent a golf car and be encouraged to do so. A rental ticket should be prepared with a receipt for the renter. The renter should present his receipt to one of the pro shop assistants, who will dispense the key, mark the number of the golf car assigned on the receipt, and make certain the renter is familiar with the operation of that particular brand of golf car.

The renter should sign the ticket showing the number of the golf car assigned. That ticket should read: "I have examined and accept the golf car assigned. If during the operation of this golf car I cause unnecessary and careless physical damage to the golf car, I assume the responsibility for its repair. It is my understanding this golf car will take two of us through 18 golfing holes. If the car fails to operate as a result of any battery or mechanical failure, the club will either provide a suitable replacement or make a prorated refund."

When I rent a Hertz or Avis automobile I am asked if I want to take out insurance at a rate of \$1 per day, and the choice is mine. If I'm already covered by my own automobile insurance, I decline; but if I don't own an automobile or don't have such complete coverage, I pay the \$1 a day for insurance. Furthermore, when I return that rented automobile somebody makes a complete circle of the automobile looking for any physical damage before its return is accepted.

I'd place a similar responsibility on my club manager. It is very possible the same person who passes out the key to the golf cars (under the golf professional's responsibility) can be the person to whom the golf car must be returned. He would then circle each golf car to observe and make a notation concerning any physical damage on the golf car (under the club manager's responsibility). If damage is found, the renter of the golf car is told repairs will be made and an invoice for the damage will be sent to him. He will be reminded that under most homeowner's insurance policies there is a clause covering damage to other people's property up to \$250. He can either turn the invoice over to his insurance company as a claim or pay

the invoice if he doesn't want to be bothered with a small claim.

Personally, I would contact my insurance man to determine what he would charge a renter for coverage against physical damage to the golf car, including a swim in the pond. If \$1 a day provides full automobile protection, a quarter should do the job for a golf car. Each renter could then be asked if he wants the insurance coverage and pay for it. This would make the renter more conscious of operating the golf car safely on the course.

I would place a printed slip on every scorecard holder asking each renter to please make a notation of any problems the golf car might have given them such as a hill holder that doesn't hold, brakes that don't work well, a squeak, or a steering problem. Such clues will make it easier for the mechanic to check the car out at night when the batteries are watered and the car is charged and cleaned.

The golf course superintendent, golf professional, and club manager should all be part of the team that keeps my golf cars operating for at least 5 years, keeps my members happy, produces a better net profit out of my rental gross, and these added responsibilities would be duly considered and compensated for.

Would I carry an inventory of golf car parts?

Bearing in mind that most golf cars are covered by one-year warranty, I would order a number of standby parts at the time I buy my golf cars. I would, depending on the number of golf cars in my fleet, keep adequate contacts, resistors, limit switches, brake shoes, and tires (follow recommendation of the distributor) on hand in the cart shed. I would ask the distributor to make certain my golf car mechanic is adequately trained in matters of simple and routine maintenance to insure any car requiring repairs can be taken care of each night to avoid any expensive downtime. I would reach an understanding with my distributor as to what he would charge for service (how fast will it be available) whenever the problem is one my mechanic cannot solve. Sometimes a telephone conversation between the mechanic and the dis-

tributor will enable the mechanic to make the repairs by himself. If the golf cars rent for from \$8 to \$12 a round, I know downtime will cost me \$50 to \$75 each week the car cannot be rented.

Under the warranty period I would make certain (mechanic's responsibility) that each defective part replaced is tagged with the car's serial number and returned to the distributor. The distributor will in turn supply a free-of-charge replacement part and in turn get it replaced by the golf car manufacturer. One can't expect to get free replacement unless he presents a defective part still under warranty and one can't expect certain wear items, such as floor mats, contacts, brake shoes, etc. to be covered under warranty. You don't get warranty on spark plugs, points, brake shoes, and certain wear items on your automobile and shouldn't expect them on golf cars.

Care and feeding of golf car batteries

Batteries are more expensive today than I can ever remember and the life of the batteries in the golf cars are very important to the net profit the golf cars will realize. I would absolutely insist the golf car mechanic follow these procedures:

1) Each telephone company is required to submit test samples of city water once a year to a laboratory to determine if the water is approved for use in their standby batteries. If I use city water, I would call the foreman at the telephone company to see if he uses city or distilled water in their batteries and adopt the same policy. If one uses well water or water from a private source, it is worth the expense to have a sample tested to determine if it contains any ingredients that can damage a battery. If distilled water is called for, you can collect it off your air-conditioning or buy a water distiller.

2) Under no circumstances should batteries be watered with a pressure hose. If a pressure hose is used or the cells are over-filled, the electrolyte will run onto the ground and cannot be replaced. Anytime you see a white powder on the concrete floor of your cart shed, somebody is being careless in watering the batteries, as this powder is electrolyte and the life of the

batteries has been shortened.

3) Be especially diligent in taking specific gravity readings and checking batteries during the first few weeks of operation. It is sometimes possible for a battery company to reverse a cell in the manufacturing process or fail to get electrolyte into one of the cells, or for a battery to be cracked when trucked to the golf car manufacturer or to the golf course. On most batteries you get free replacement during the first 3 months, and if any of these problems are present, it will show up in the first week's operation. Normally (not always) a battery that fails after 3 months and short of 1½ years (depending on length of golf season, frequency of golf car use, and golf course terrain) is the fault of poor battery maintenance.

4) When cleaning golf cars daily give care to cleaning corrosion off battery cables and making certain all battery cables are tightened.

5) Don't forget the value of junk batteries. The price of batteries fluctuates every month as lead and other ingredients go up and down. The junk value of batteries goes up and down on the same formula and can be worth anywhere from \$2 to as much as \$5.50 each.

6) Part of battery maintenance is charger maintenance. Make certain your golf car distributor carefully instructs the right personnel. Undercharging is more severe than overcharging, but neither does a battery any good. The specific gravity of a fully charged battery is from 1.260 to 1.280. If one cell on a battery is gone, the entire battery is shot, even though the other two cells check out properly.

7) The golf car fleet should be rotated with cars having only one round of golf today going out tomorrow ahead of those cars that had two rounds today. It is important to avoid deep-cycling of batteries (allowing specific gravity readings to fall below 1.200) as the deep-cycling of a battery takes more out of a battery's life than is taken from a battery not deep-cycled.

8) Always water the batteries **after charge**. Watering the batteries before a charge is risking over-flow of electrolyte out of the cell vents as the electrolyte expands. Water should be added ⅜ of an inch above the plates.

However, the electrolyte level should never be allowed to fall below the top of the separators. If the electrolyte is below the tops of the separators, enough water should be added before charging to raise the level to the top of the separators.

9) Each battery has a potential of 400 to 600 cycles of life and it is quite obvious it means dollars and cents for the club if you remove only ½ cycle from the batteries' life each day instead of two full cycles.

While golf cars are generally thought to have six 6-volt batteries for a 36 volt system, each cell is actually 2.1 volts (6.3 volts per battery) giving a golf car a 37.8 volt system. One should charge back up to 130 percent of what is taken out.

Chances are the golf club used by the golfer on the first tee, the ball he hits, the tee he uses, the shoes and glove he wears, the sweater, jacket, shirt, and slacks, the bag he carries or mounts on the golf car were all merchandised, promoted, and sold to him by the golf professional. If he is walking it might be because the rental of the golf car was not promoted by the golf professional with the same enthusiasm employed selling a set of golf clubs.

If I owned a golf course I would have a meeting with my insurance man, golf professional, golf course superintendent, club manager, and golf car mechanic to jointly consider recommendations from all as to the brand of golf car to be purchased; the distributor offering the best parts and service; whether we will buy three- or four-wheel, gas or electric; and how they will be merchandised, promoted, sold, serviced, insured and maintained after they are delivered. The members of a greens committee or golf car committee should also be in attendance as well as a committee in charge of communications, enabling them to publish proper golf car instructions to the membership.

I'd not only promote the golf car's use in every possible way at my own golf course, but when given the opportunity at the PGA, GCSAA, or CMAA level, I'd encourage realization that the golf car has spread from 80,000 in 1963 to 440,000 in 1977, and without the golf car rental income some golf clubs might not be in business today. □