

golfbusiness

FORMERLY GOLFDOM

Senior citizens: golden opportunity for the golf business

by Gene Burress, CGCS

The alleged exodus of golfers and potential golfers to tennis, racquetball, and other recreational activities has not, for the most part, included retired persons. Retirees have little or no concern that golf may consume too much time, the main argument against it by younger, busier people. Retirees are ready and eager for the adventure that golf brings. This adventure starts a new challenge in their life and at the same time provides precious social activity, an opportunity to make new friends.

Many senior citizens are discovering golf for the first time. Even if they were introduced to golf in their youth, the game was often abandoned or curtailed due to the necessities of career development, business, and family. Some never, ever expected to join "those dummies chasing that little white ball." But a friend, neighbor, or someone already retired persuaded the reluctant new retiree to "come on out and meet the gang, a good group of

guys." Probably, the spouse provided some urging. In any case, time did not matter. The golf bug and the circle of good golfing friends took over.

Public golf courses all over the country are developing strong contingents of senior golfers. Senior golf is growing by leaps and bounds. Golf administrators, professionals, and superintendents are encountering a group to serve which a few short years ago did not exist. The senior golfers are organizing. In many locations they have become a "pressure group" with whom politicians and golf management have had to cope.

Time is of little consequence to the retired person. Active minds can now lend themselves to what's going on at the golf courses. Some of the smallest details of the golf operations, seemingly unimportant to management, can become irritants or suggestions. Some seniors will arbitrarily move tee markers placed there early that morning. Many of them prac-

tically live at the course, taking a personal interest far greater than management appreciates. They are adept at knowing whom to contact and have therefore become a powerful voice in the politics of administering a golf program.

Most retirees live on a fixed income so the quarter or dollar that is spent must be watched. This is the area where most complaints originate. Some believe that because they are retired or have reached that "golden age" it all should be given to them. A prevalent attitude is that the establishment "owes us." Some politicians have forced golf management to give golf away to the seniors for fear of "gray power."

Growth and involvement

Percentages of senior play will vary greatly from the retirement areas of the sun belt to the northern metropolitan areas. In Cincinnati it ranges from 10 to 15 percent of total play, depending on the golf course. Nearly 700 seniors play weekly in organized groups. Of these, 90 percent or more play only nine holes each outing. Last year, approximately 35,000 senior greens fees were collected on seven golf courses.

In many municipal golf programs, senior golf is given away. It is this writer's opinion that if the senior rate is not at least half the regular fee, then it becomes another liability for the taxpayer. The range of greens fees across the country is wide. Some are free, others \$1 or half, three-quarters or full rate. Annual fee plans are available for as low as \$30, although the popularity of annual fees among golf administrators is diminishing. Trying to eliminate these undesirable annual fees has become an extremely difficult task due to objections from those not wanting to pay their fair share. No matter what price the senior has to pay, however, the popularity of golf among retirees will continue to grow.

Growth is bordering on the phenomenal. It will not subside or level off. Three years ago there were only four organized senior groups in the City of Cincinnati municipal golf program. Today there are eight organized groups, one without a formal organization, and one fledgling group



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This is Burress' second article in GOLF BUSINESS (the first, on government golf courses, appeared in the August 1977 issue), and he will be making further contributions to the magazine as the newest member of its Advisory Board. A member of the GCSAA's Educational Committee and the Board of Trustees of the Ohio Turfgrass Foundation, he is also a Certified Golf Course Superintendent.



developing. The organized groups have constitutions and bylaws which cover a varied range of subjects: ceiling on the number of members, age requirements, election and duties of officers, committees, and dues.

Not all have a ceiling on the number of members, but most do. The Bogey Benders at Neumann Golf Course have a ceiling of 90. Their waiting list grew so large that a spin-off group, the Early Birds, was formed with a ceiling of 60. Each now has a waiting list of 30.

The Par Hoppers, with full roster of 120, have 25 more golfers waiting to join. The Golden Swingers ceiling is 92, with 20 more on the waiting list. The Divot Diggers and Bogey Busters have maximums of 72 and 40. The other two have no ceiling and have over 60 members. Most groups are male oriented, but the fledgling group is mixed. There is one predominantly female seniors group which plays at Reeves Golf Course.

Involvement of the City of Cincinnati golf administration is very minimal. Initial arrangements to develop a new group and senior tournaments are initiated by the golf staff. Golf professionals Hank Wilms, Larry Brant, Jack Albury, and Jerry Wood have had great success in their efforts to organize new groups. Once the idea or group is born, the seniors take over and administer their own programs.

In 1977, representatives of each group met with the city supervisor of

golf, who presented the idea and description of a four-man scramble. The seniors enthusiastically bought the idea and developed their own tournament rules. They placed a limit on the number of teams each league could enter. The field was filled with 32 teams and some groups were disappointed because they were turned away. The City Open Senior Golf Championship played on a weekend has not been a popular tournament, even though it is in flights by age groups. This event is being scheduled on weekdays in 1978 in an effort to increase participation.

Contributions and considerations

Cincinnati is proud of its seniors. Their constructive ideas and suggestions are invaluable. The constant grippers are soon identified, and management develops its techniques in separating the wheat from the chaff. Our seniors' involvement is vital in our youth tournaments. The Par Hoppers volunteer their services to monitor play, post scores, determine long drive and closest to the hole, and just do anything they can to assist the pro.

The Bogey Benders took on a special project in which they raised funds and beautified their course with flower beds and plantings, which they maintain. Of the 14 members who serve on the Municipal Golf Advisory Council, seven are seniors providing their valued expertise to the direction of Cincinnati's Golf Program.

The golf program in Cincinnati provides for reduced rates for seniors at age 65 — or at 62 if on Social Security. Those receiving Social Security at an earlier age due to a disability are also eligible to receive a "senior card." The State of Ohio "Golden Buckeye" card issued to seniors is also honored. Greens fees are \$2.10 for 9 holes and \$3.50 for 18 holes. Fees are reduced further on the executive and par 3 courses. There is no annual fee plan. Seniors must tee-off before 12 noon on weekdays only, though under consideration is a proposal to increase the cutoff time to 2:00 p.m. Weekday mornings are crowded almost to capacity. Organized senior groups utilize two mornings at three golf courses. Other mornings have scheduled leagues for women, shift workers, and youth. Without question, the seniors form the nucleus of the Cincinnati weekday morning golf program.

There is room for some expansion at several courses, not so at others. The question is, what will the future hold? Expansion of present courses or development of new facilities may not be prudent, even though facilities for senior expansion are needed. Seniors in past years have been referred to as the "gray minority," but the government census department states that this minority will change to a majority in a few years. If this is true, it appears that the demand for time on the golf course will definitely exceed the supply. □