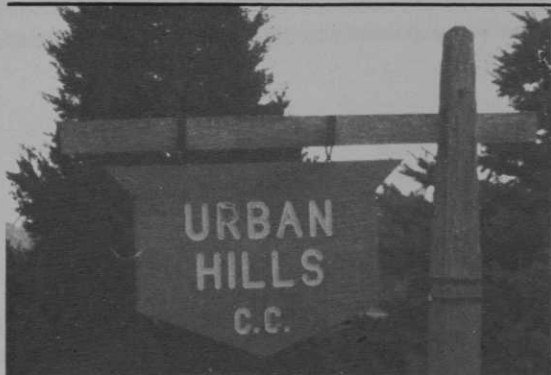


## GOLF BUSINESS PROFILE

# From farm to daily fee golf course

by David J. Slaybaugh, editor



The Richton Park area, about 30 miles south of downtown Chicago, is much like other suburban fringe areas all over the county: half of what was farmland 15 years ago is now covered by aluminum-sided housing developments and "natural wood" condominiums. In the middle of it all are two golf courses that were also farmland 15 years ago. The land belonged to John and Wilma Urban, then successful dairy owners in nearby Chicago Hts.

That 160 acres of land was farmed by a tenant who split the profit with the Urbans on a 50/50 basis. In 1961, the farm provided the Urban family with a home and all of \$200 in income. Naturally, Urban says, "We began to search for some use which would return a higher profit, since I had no illusions about being a gentleman farmer. As we walked over the eroded hilltops and through the low spots on the acreage, one of us made the comment that the only thing the land was good for was a golf course."

After pondering that comment for several weeks, Urban decided that perhaps it wasn't such a bad idea. He called in the National Golf Foundation, and the NGF representative said that the land was "a natural" for a golf course. Then a golf course architect was invited to inspect the site. He, too, said it was "a natural." Shortly thereafter, a construction firm was asked to estimate the cost of building a golf

course there, and the owner said the land and location made it — what else? — "a natural."

Urban still had some doubts, but, he says, "At least we had three expert opinions, so we felt more confident about the possibility of building a course. We looked over the literature we had gathered, talked to a lot of people, and finally decided to go into the golf business."

It was a good decision. The semi-private facility that the Urban family operates today had gross receipts of \$290,000 for fiscal year 1977-78, ending in September. The 18-hole layout averages 25,000 to 27,000 rounds of golf per year on a daily fee basis — which does not include rounds played by the 125 golfers and families who paid for an annual membership with unlimited play.

## Both sides of the road

That success didn't come easily, however. The Urbans' land was divided into a 40-acre parcel on the east side of the road and a 120-acre parcel on the west side, so they decided to begin by building a 9-hole executive course, a 25-tee driving range, and an 18-hole miniature golf course on the 40-acre site.

Golf course architect Larry Packard designed both the 40-acre layout and a regulation 18 holes on the other side of the road. Construction of the short course was completed,

quickly, and the Urbans opened their first facility in May 1963.

They were "pleased with the operation of the facility," Urban says, and the 18-hole course across the road was opened in 1967.

"After the 18-hole course was opened," Urban adds, "we found that play increased each year at a gratifying rate." So much so, that when an adjacent town offered to buy the executive course, driving range, and miniature golf facility, the Urbans agreed. That facility is still operated today, directly across the street from Urban Hills Country Club, as the Park Forest Municipal Golf Center.

When the Urbans opened their 18-hole golf course, they were living in a 100-year-old farmhouse on the premises. They made the first floor of their home into a clubhouse which could seat 40 people inside and another 40 outside on the porch. They served only beer, soda, chips, candy, gum, and frozen sandwiches. The pro shop stocked balls, gloves, tees, and three sets of clubs "leaning against a wall." Even that seemed too much at first, but as play on the course increased, so did the need for a larger clubhouse.

Typical of everything John Urban does, the new clubhouse was designed not only to accommodate present needs, but also to be expanded at a future date with a minimum of expense and effort. This meant locating plumbing, electrical lines, and so on where they could be added to without having to be moved.

The wood and brick clubhouse, built in 1972, measured 40 by 70 feet and included basement storage for a dozen Harley-Davidson gas-powered golf cars, easily accessible by a ramp leading directly from outside.

Another ramp enables suppliers to back their trucks right to the basement unloading area and put merchandise directly in the walk-in cooler and freezer. Tanks of mix and beer are also located in the basement, and the beverages piped upstairs via a mixing system.

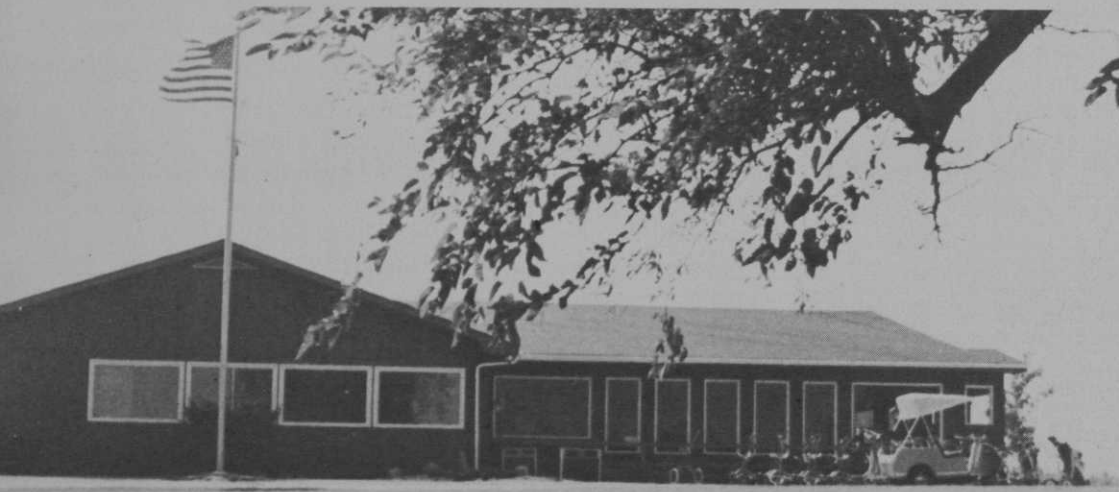
An addition to the clubhouse was



Urban Hills golf professional Bruce Meyer practices on the putting green outside the clubhouse. The large mulberry tree on the right was the only tree on the property when the course was built.



LEFT: Ramp next to pro shop leads to basement of clubhouse, where golf cars are stored and maintained.



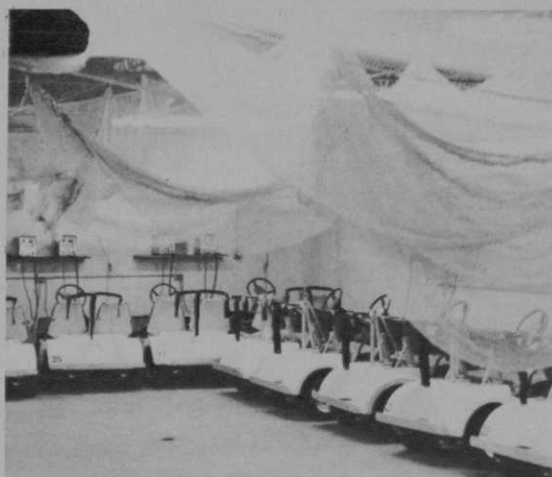
ABOVE: Left half of clubhouse, built in 1972, now contains bar and dining area. Wing on right was added in 1974 to provide more dining area, bigger pro shop.

RIGHT: Owner John Urban at work in the office. Records for every aspect of the business are at his fingertips, giving him complete control over his operation.



ABOVE: Metal building houses course maintenance equipment and supplies. Garages on the side are for members' personal golf cars.

RIGHT: Part of Urban Hills' golf car fleet recharging in the basement of the clubhouse.



completed in April 1974 and doubled the size of the original building. This doubled the capacity of the bar, provided a full-size pro shop for the first time, and included a fairly spacious office. The addition's basement was dug deep enough to hang four driving range nets above the 16 Club Car electric golf cars which are hooked to their Lester battery chargers there.

#### Income and expense

Unlike many golf courses today, Urban Hills Country Club doesn't depend heavily on those golf cars for income. According to the club's golf professional, Bruce Meyer, the cars average two rounds apiece on Saturday and Sunday, plus a round every other day on weekdays. Their rental accounts for about 7½ percent of the total revenue at Urban Hills — about half the national average for daily fee courses. Rental fees are \$6 for 9 holes, \$11 for 18. In addition, 22 members pay \$115 (for gas-powered) or 135 (for electric) to keep their own golf cars at the course; these are stored in garages along the sides of the maintenance building.

Unlike many golf course owners today, John Urban readily disclosed his facility's income and expense figures. "People are reluctant to talk about it," he says, "but we're damn fools. We in the golf business don't exchange enough information."

Urban Hills Country Club's revenue, however, is nothing to be ashamed of — especially considering the negative effect Chicago's "spring" weather had on play this year. Income at Urban Hills in the first 6 months of 1978 was only 73 percent of what it was last year. "We really didn't get any good play until the end of May," he explains.

Increasing play to increase revenue is the name of the game at Urban Hills. "Our thought is to get a lot of golfers out here," Urban says. "To that end, we've gone after leagues: ladies, industrial, and also junior golf."

Four high schools use Urban Hills as their home course, getting as many as 74 junior golfers on the course at a time. They play at a reduced rate, of course. "We're going to get a juniors league going next year for sure," Urban says. "We in the golf business have been remiss about promoting junior golf. We need to get students from different schools to play together on a friendly competitive basis.

"If they find their way here to play when they're in school, we hope they

will find their way here to play when they're older, too."

Green fees are \$3.50 and \$6.75 on weekdays, \$4.50 and \$8.00 on weekends and holidays. There are reduced fees for seniors, juniors, and twilight play.

Expenses, Urban says, are "about the same as income." About 49 percent of expenses is directly attributable to golf course maintenance at Urban Hills. About 21 percent is attributable to course maintenance labor.

Superintendent Jack Urban, John's son and part of the operation "since the beginning," keeps a crew of five or six full-time workers and one part-time worker during the summer months. He employs "as many good ones as I can hang onto" during the remainder of the year. Jack does his own night watering, his own golf car maintenance, and minor repairs on maintenance equipment. If major repairs are needed, the equipment is sent back to the dealer who sold it, or he is asked to come out and repair it.

A look around the course and in the maintenance building reveals two Toro Greensmaster 3 triplex riding mowers, a nine-gang Toro Parkmaster mowing tractor, a Ford tractor pulling a Roseman nine-gang unit, and a Roseman five-gang mower used for rough and around trees. Urban has three Ford LCG tractors in all, one of which is a diesel that has proven to be "much more economical" than those with normal gasoline engines. In addition, another Ford diesel tractor is equipped with a frontloader and a backhoe.

A Myers pump is used for spraying on the course, while a Cushman Truckster with a Dedoes aerator on the back is "a great timesaver." In fact, Urban has begun doing aerating for other golf courses with the

Cushman/Dedoes combination unit. Other vehicles include a Ford F-350 dump truck and four-wheel-drive International Scout. A Dobbins Turf Dresser has just been purchased; Jack Urban says it will spread topdressing materials "all the way from fine sand to black dirt."

Urban has ordered a new trencher, which he will use in modernizing the irrigation system during the "off" season (the course is actually open year-round, despite the Chicago weather). The irrigation system is now a manual one, with heads on tees and greens and every 90 feet on fairways. Water is collected in a man-made lake on the golf course.

Urban Hills Country Club represents, in a way, an American dream come true: a family business that has become successful through the perseverance and hard work of the people in it. Jack helped create a fine golf course, and he keeps it that way, actually making it better every year. Wilma oversees the dining room and kitchen, but also puts in her time in the pro shop or the office or wherever else she's needed. Bruce is a nephew, and one senses that he is an integral part of the Urban Hills family; he runs the pro shop and gives lessons, but he also knows just about everything else that goes on and how to manage it. And John Urban pulls the whole thing together; his grasp of the golf business and the record-keeping aids he has developed have created mini-businesses in themselves: he sells forms to other golf courses and does consulting work as well. Now he has an idea about creating a purchasing pool with other golf courses to buy big pieces of equipment that they couldn't afford to purchase individually ... but that's another story. □

*Urban Hills Superintendent Jack Urban about to cross bridge for golf cars; it looks like culvert pipe, but is actually an old railroad tank car with the ends cut off before being sunk in the creek. This is one of two such bridges on the course; they will never wash away.*



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