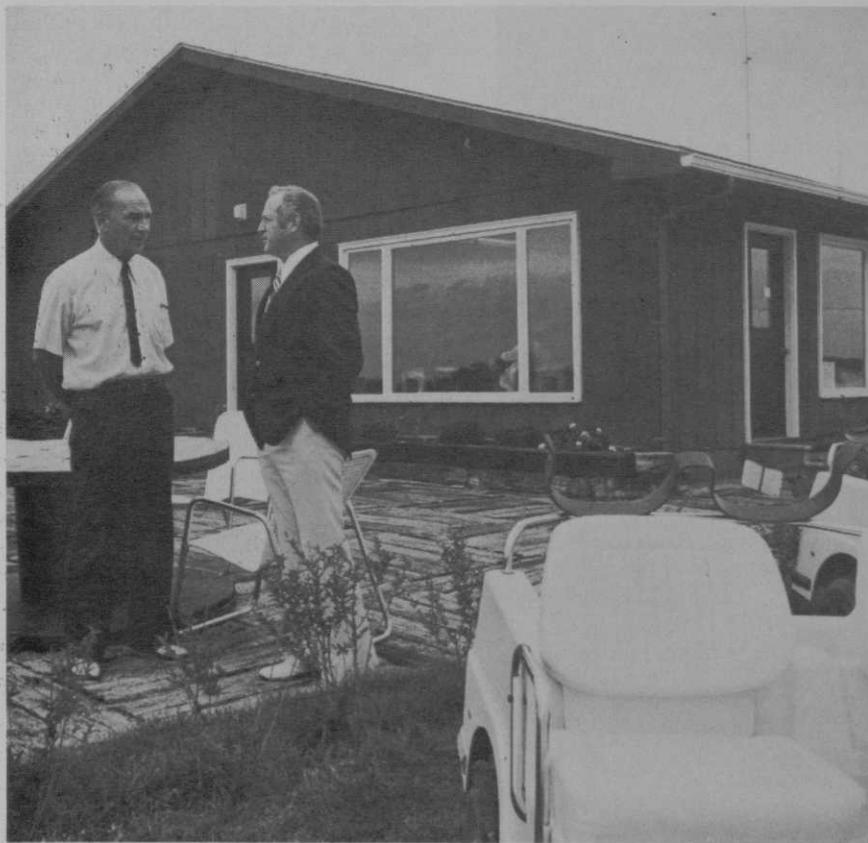


Early bird membership and reciprocal play helped ease 9-hole club's financial woes.

## Marketing is one way to increase golf membership and revenue

By **Leon S. Clements**, Director, Auxiliary Services, Western Illinois University



**Harry Mussalto**, (left) course manager, speaks with Clements in front of the O.L. Champion club house.

With increasing competition among leisure sports, nine-hole golf courses can no longer afford to sit back and expect the public to stand in line at their doors. While golf still ranks as one of the prestige sports in our society, such sports as tennis, jogging, handball, racquetball, slow pitch softball, and many others are constantly vying for the sports enthusiast's time and dollars.

In such an environment, marketing the golf program to the public becomes a vital aspect of the total golf program. This is especially true in the sparsely populated, rural areas where it is common for nine-hole courses to struggle with rising labor, equipment, and chemical costs. We faced these problems at our university-owned course as we attempted to operate it as an auxiliary enterprise.

At Western Illinois University in the mid-70's, rising inflationary costs were greatly affecting our money flow. Our program needed fertilizer, more golf carts, a pro shop, a cart shelter, chemicals, and other course improvements. Since the University operates under stringent governmental rules for borrowing money or purchasing materials, we needed to devise a program that would generate money early in the spring to cure our financial woes.

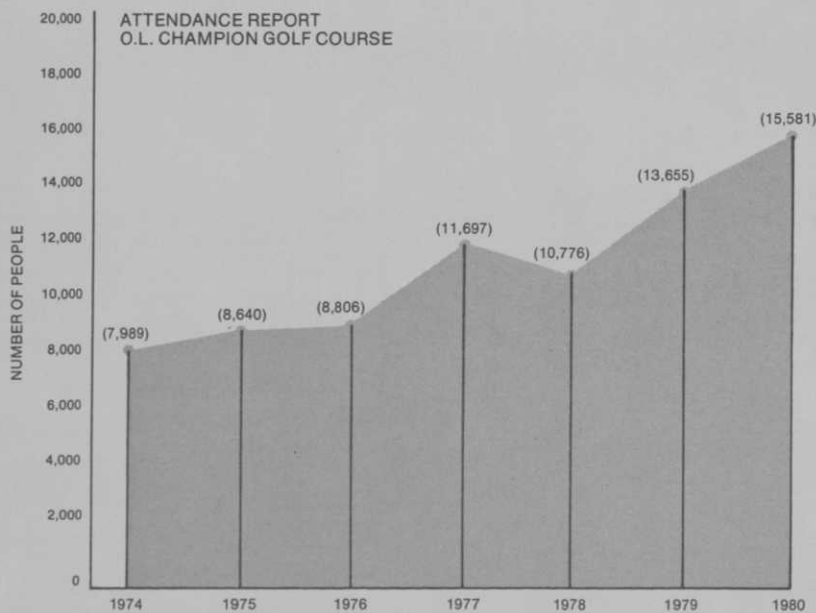
Our first approach was to market what we termed the Early Bird membership program. This plan offered a reduced rate to golfers purchasing their memberships prior to the April 1 deadline for the approaching golf season.

Our second approach was to design a reciprocal membership card with other nine-hole courses in our immediate area. We initially contacted three other courses and found them receptive to the plan.

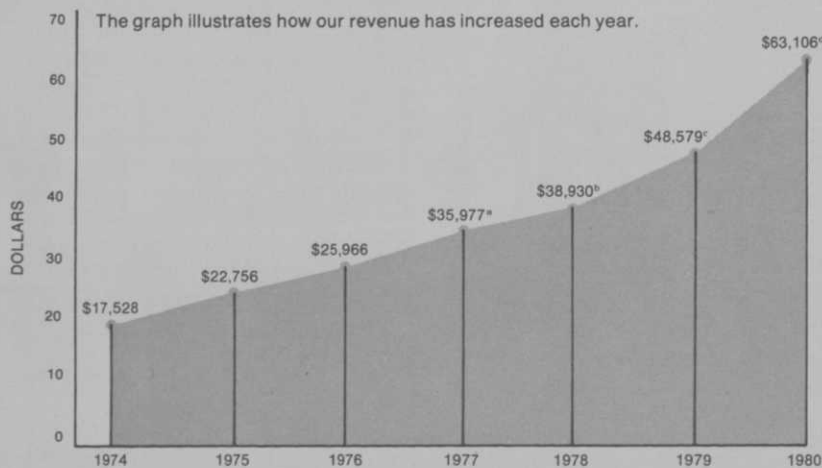
The reciprocal play program has been so well received since 1977 that other courses in the area became interested in joining. Today ten courses within a 40-mile radius participate in the program. One of these courses happens to be a very fine 18-hole course.

The program is quite simple. If a person buys a club membership before the April 1 deadline, he receives a reciprocal card which allows him to play three times free at each of the other courses. A family membership entitles two family members to play free on each punch. Some members now make it a summer ritual to play the other courses.

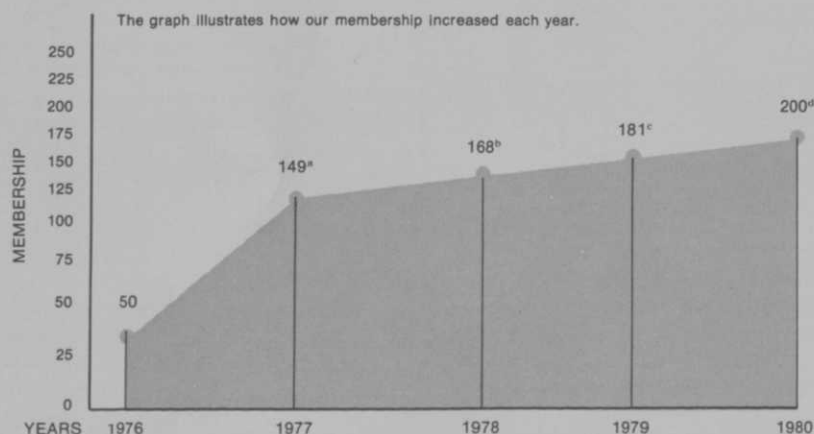
Each year we commence our marketing procedures with a noon



The above graph shows the number of golfers who used our course over the last eight years. Weather, of course, influences usage. However, the addition of carts and the playability of our excellent course has been a main factor in influencing our increased usage.



- a. Four clubs participating in the reciprocal program.
  - b. Five clubs participating in the reciprocal program.
  - c. Nine clubs participating in the reciprocal program.
  - d. Ten clubs participating in the reciprocal program.
- (WIU Golf year runs July 1 - June 30)



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luncheon early in February. At this meeting we explain our course improvements and try to stimulate interest in purchasing the Early Bird membership. Actually, we do very little media advertising outside of the luncheon since those in attendance soon pass the word on to the community. We do, however, send out flyers to all known golfers notifying them of our excellent golf package.

When we began the Early Bird reciprocal play program in the spring of 1977, our revenue jumped approximately \$10,000 over the previous year. When we increased the number of clubs to nine in 1979, our revenue again increased another \$10,000 over the previous year. Our financial picture improved even more than anticipated in 1980 with a growth of almost \$15,000 over 1979.

When evaluating our membership growth, we discovered our greatest spurt came the initial year when we proposed the Early Bird and reciprocal package. However, we have experienced a significant membership increase of 10 percent each year and have reached our goal of 200 members this year.

We do not want to leave the impression that the Early Bird membership drive and reciprocal play card are the sole reasons for our growth. On the contrary, several other factors have encouraged our growth. For instance, during this period we hired two very energetic young turf managers who greatly improved the playability and beauty of the course. The fact that our greens fee structure has remained low in comparison with other courses and the acquisition of ten new golf carts also has definitely contributed to increased play.

However, a large measure of our success must be attributed to the early flow of money that we used to pour into projects such as a new pro shop, cart shed, new carts and needed equipment, and the fertilizer/chemicals that are so necessary for an excellent turf program.

We are convinced that we have a golf package that definitely competes with the appeal of other sports. The WIU golf package has provided our members with the added variety they want in their club membership. After all, someone has said, "Variety is the spice of life!" This certainly has been true for our program.