

Shoot the lights out!

Night golf takes hold across the country

BY VERN PUTNEY

Night golf no longer is a fantasy, and the light switch came none too soon, say many golfers who work 9 to 5.

The Nitelite ball, introduced in 1986 by Pick Point Enterprises in Mirror Lake, N.H., more for novelty than practicality, has been swatted in 19 countries and an estimated 5,200 tournaments.

The 4-inch lightsticks, placed on flagsticks, 150-yard markers and tees, are visible a half-mile away.

Next step probably will be installation of light poles at strategic locations, in the pattern of driving ranges.

What this would do to the work schedules of hard-pressed course superintendents, professionals and clubhouse staff is anybody's guess.

Certainly, it won't lighten the load. The few who might have thought of night play hadn't advocated it publicly. A 55-hour work week in season is sufficient.

Pick Point president Nelson F. Newcomb, a fine golfer, wasn't quite in the dark when asked about an illuminated golf ball. As a schoolboy, he'd painted a football with phosphorous, which gives off a white glow, to extend after-school playtime.

Still, the former St. Louis Browns baseball farmhand's initial response to queries from avid golfers was, "They don't play golf at night, do they?"

Not unless necessary, it seemed. Callers largely were twilight league golfers who tee off at 5 to 6 p.m., then race the clock, dusk and darkness.

The last few groups caught out on the course wanted a ball they could see to finish their round.

Largely to satisfy what Newcomb felt would be a minor market, he and his research staff huddled. Since they'd scored well with a lighted football a decade earlier, and had succeeded with a lighted whiffle

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ball, hockey puck and other sports equipment, the golf ball appeared worth a try.

First step was to drill three holes through a golf ball, then plug four of the six holes with a plastic substance that glows. Six points of a rapidly spinning ball would create the illusion of a completely lighted ball.

Altering the ball would mean distance would be lost. The plus was that the ball wouldn't be.

Reaction was so enthusiastic that a whole new world of playing (and business) opportunity may have been ignited.

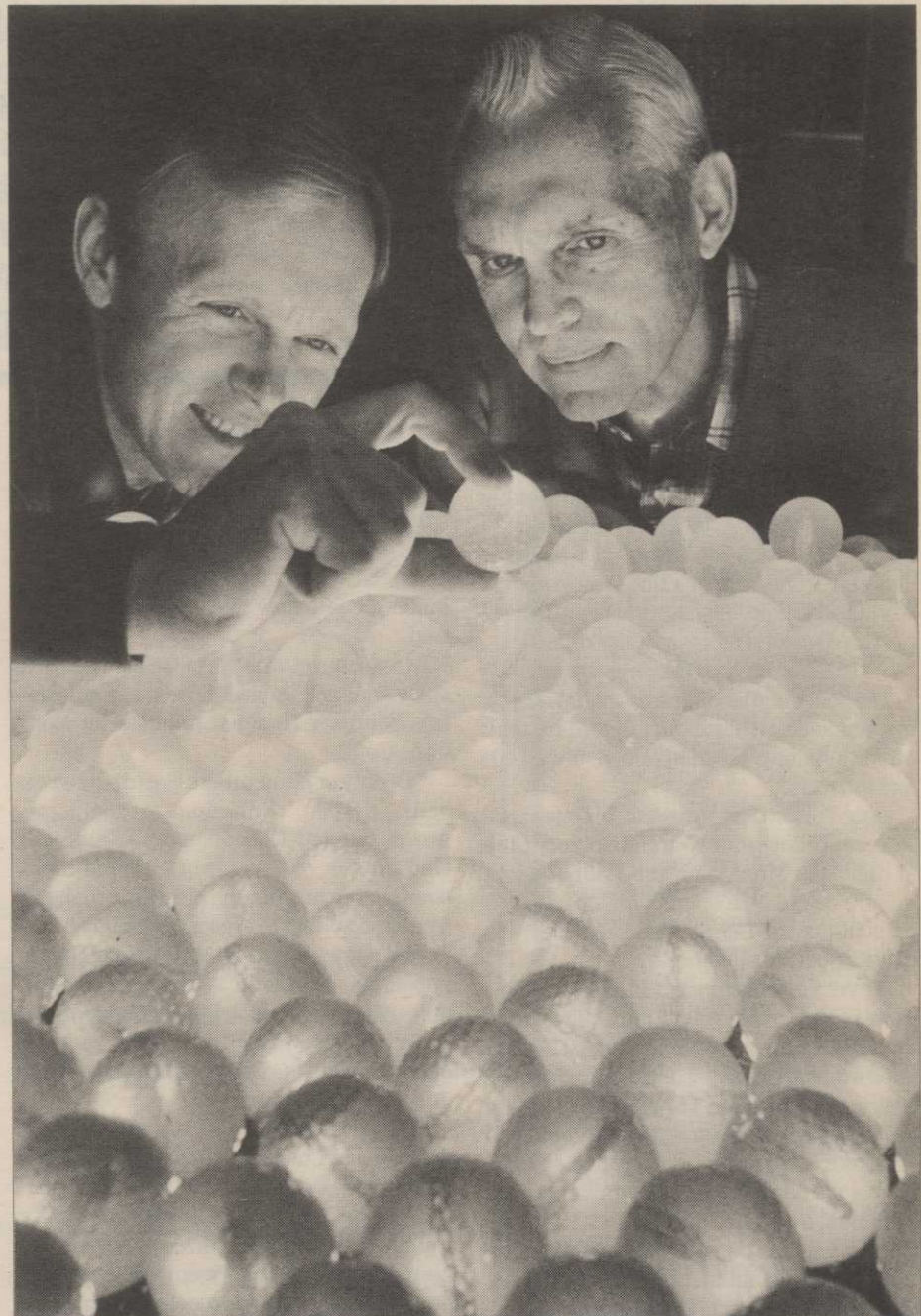
Further refinement is in the works for the ball which (with two nightsticks) sells for \$5.95 and has been bought quickly at golf shops.

"We're working on a ball we feel will be the distance equal of any on the market," Newcomb said. "The night ball is far removed from the novelty stage. However, we have no plans now to have the ball conform to USGA specifications. Because of nightstick insertion, acceptance may never be practical."

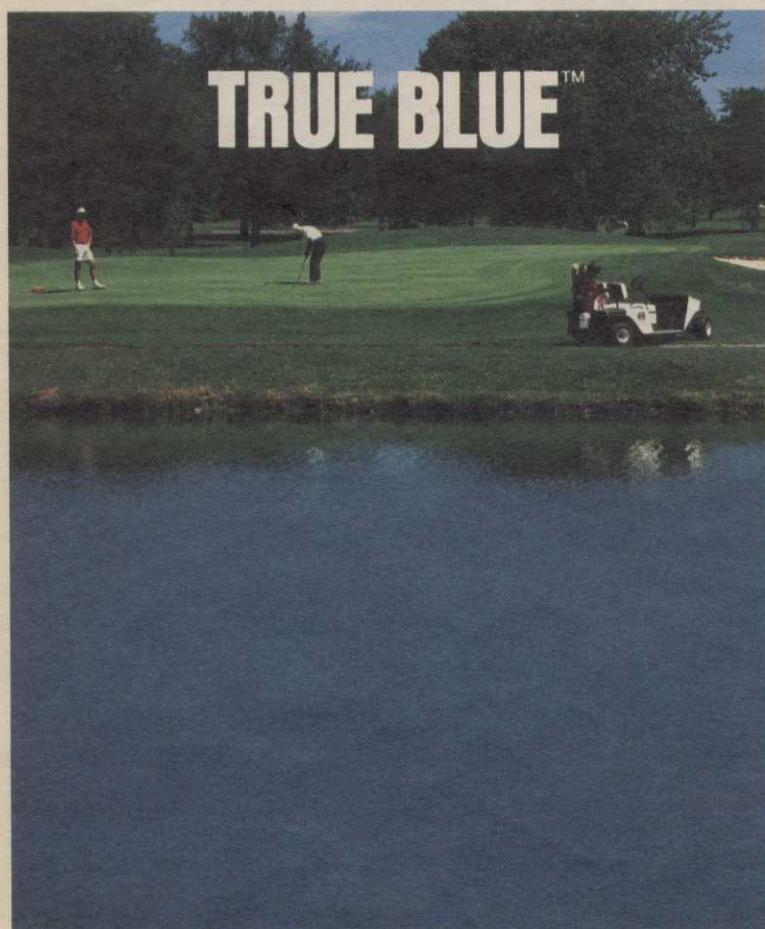
Pros tested the ball at the recent Professional Golfers' Association Show in Orlando, Fla., and consensus was that only about 10 percent of yardage was lost.

Therefore, it may have been more than curiosity that attracted sales representatives of major golf ball companies to the Pick Point booth. A glowing giant competitor may emerge.

Introduction of a Nitelite putter triggered eye appeal and its balance and feel drew favorable comment, but "The Ball" retained



Pick Point president Nelson F. Newcomb, right, and son Corky look over their invention, Nitelite golf balls, that may revolutionize maintenance and use of courses.



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the spotlight.

One booth visitor underlined the ball's most practical aspect. "In 1987," he recalled, "I held one night tournament. This jumped to four in 1988. This year I plan 30. This means \$500 extra per night in proceeds from greens fees, golf cars, liquor and lounge business. These events will increase my income \$15,000 a year."

Closest-to-the-pin and putting contests are other night features that require little manpower, are fun and are profitable.

A spokesman for Nevada Bob's, one of the nation's biggest discount golf outlets, reports "tremendous" interest.

"Nitelite has been our No. 1 accessory item since first shipment in the fall of 1987," said Dave Dyer, manager of Nevada Bob's in South Portland, Maine. "The ball has taken off, and it's tough to keep in stock. They're bought in lots by course officials and committee members staging nine-hole scrambles."

On display, no sales pitch is required, adds Dyer. Curiosity alone is enough to prompt investment.

Dyer, formerly a pro at several Maine courses, predicts the ball not only will light up the sky and fairway, but will revolutionize the game.

"Course supers and club pros think they work long hours now. Wait a few years!" he

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Craze turns on switch for 9-5 workers

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said. "I base this on the daily work force once shut out of the game and now, thanks to Nitelite, able to participate and enjoy a sport in which so many are involved.

"The course super and pro, or designated substitute, must be on hand to protect the course and conduct nocturnal business. This could turn out to be a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week operation."

Newcomb is more cautious in his assessment. "Still," he observed, "another 50,000 to 100,000 rounds annually can buy a lot of added staff and generate increased course profitability."

He noted that Nitelite play has found favor at convention sites. Executives cooped up in seminars during the day flock to the arclight action.

The manufacturer pointed out that the totally translucent illuminated ball is official size and weight, but acknowledged that that one or two clubs longer may be required when judging distance to the green.

lite ball in July 1987. Fifteen foursomes played 12 holes in four hours. Water holes were skirted. The ball was teed up all the way around.

Lee and assistant Doug Thompson have staged several night events since the program. Late-late evening golf is so popular that premium rates are charged to discourage all-night — and early-morning — play. Even so, it's hard to close up shop before midnight.

The inaugural Moonlight Pro-Am tourney last December at Boca Raton, Fla., Executive Country Club, won by Jean Guy Dumont, netted \$1,200 for the American Cancer Society.

A series of scramble events to benefit the ACS concluded with the NiteLite Nationals last October at Doral Country Club in Miami, Fla.

A tourney at Monroe, La., proved a fantastic fund-raiser, as did an event at Hickory Woods Golf Course in Ypsilanti, Mich. Course manager Jeff Fulton was worried

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**— Nelson Newcomb
Pick Point president**

The longest known drive is 310 yards by Scotty Baker, son of Jim Baker Sr., pro at St. Leo (Fla.) Golf Course. Scotty, 5-11 and 220, whales the regulation ball in the 375-yard range.

A Nitelite tournament at Arrowhead Country Club in Emmons, Minn., lured 1,500 players and there have been several tourneys at the Marriott Camelback in Scottsdale, Ariz. Ex-Sen. Gary Hart and Karsten Solheim, manufacturer of Ping golf clubs, paired for second place at 1 under par.

Billy Max, head pro at Colonial Country Club in Lynnfield, Mass., held a nighttime New England Pro-Wife tourney. Said Max, "The course looked like World War II with the balls shooting through the darkness like tracer bullets."

Billed as the first professional NiteLite tournament and dubbed "The Night Belongs to Michelob" in a bow to its sponsor, a Tournament Players Association four-hole event scored high in popularity last June at Urbana, Ill., Golf and Country Club. More are planned this year.

Richard Lee, pro at Hyland Hills Golf Course in Southern Pines, N. C., staged a Carolina PGA Section pro-am with the Nite-

that the last foursome wouldn't finish until daylight. Fortunately, it completed its nine-hole round at 5:30 a.m.

Bill Ridge, assistant pro at Bob-O-Link Country Club in Lawrenceburg, Ky., played 504 holes in a day — and night. He beat the old marathon record of 424 holes by starting at midnight and playing the first 17 nine-hole rounds with a NiteLite ball.

Owner Dick Harris put the finishing touch to his new Falmouth (Maine) Country Club course last Oct. 31 with a nine-hole scramble which he described as "fantastic, fun and a great social event."

"The darker the better," Harris said. "You can't lose the ball, the eyes adjust, it's a unique mix of people and party atmosphere, and its popularity is going to grow."

Harris wasn't the perfect host. He, wife Nancy, son Jeff and Laurel Myers scored a winning 1-over-par 37.

Golf enthusiast Karen Glidden, from the shop staff at Salmon Falls Golf Course in Buxton, Maine, was a quick convert to "Glow Ball."

Casting about for tournament ideas and increased member participation, she spotted the balls at Nevada Bob's. Dyer explained the variety of uses. Glidden received owner John Barber's approval to experiment. In late May, Glidden picked July 29 as the best tourney trial time — the night of a full moon.

The choice proved ideal. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. "The moon shining on the adjacent Saco River made a beautiful sight for the 45 scramble contestants starting play at 9:15 p.m.," she recalled. "All that was missing was the baying of the hounds. In their place was laughter and levity."

While applauding Glidden's enterprise, Newcomb echoes Harris' outlook — dimmer is brighter. "The blacker the evening, the better ball visibility," said Newcomb.

Golfers who once slipped out of the office early to get in a few holes before darkness, soon may be arriving at work sleepy-eyed. There may be many a suspicious look when they try to explain that they were up all night, not with the baby, but playing golf.

History repeats itself in new form near historical site

Mirror Lake, the home of Nightlite ball manufacturer Pick Point Enterprises, is about 75 miles from Lynn, Mass. The General Electric Co. baseball field there was in 1926 the site of the first organized night baseball game.

The next shining moment in sports history may have originated in this tiny New Hampshire town, population 1,500

Pick Point's future may never be as bright as GE's present, but president Nelson F. Newcomb takes pride in doubling of the company's work force since golf took over the night shift.

Foursome in '30s ahead of their time

Illustrating that there is little new under the sun — or moon — the retiring professional at Riverside Municipal Course in Portland, Maine, recalled participation in a night playing experiment there 50 years ago.

Frank Tirabassi, brother Americo and the late Charles Rounds and Roy Walker teed off at 9:30 p.m. Rounds had painted a half-dozen balls with phosphorus and induced the others to give

night golf a whirl.

All but Frank called off darkness play after three holes. Frank went the nine-hole route and scored a 4-over-par 40. His only trouble seeing the ball came on the short par 4 seventh hole. He took a double-bogey 6.

"I hit my second shot into a trap," he said. "The ball blended with the color of the sand. I couldn't distinguish, and needed two shots to get out."

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