

BY PAT JONES

THE Doctor IS IN

A SOCIAL SCIENTIST AND DEMOGRAPHER DISCUSSES
KEYS TO OPERATING A SUCCESSFUL FACILITY

The golf industry is chock full of Ph.D. types. You can't swing a dead cat at a turf conference without hitting Dr. Someone who's spent his adult life studying, teaching or researching the art and science of growing grass.

But to my knowledge, there's only one notable industry Ph.D. whose degree is in, of all things, geography. His name is John Rooney, and he has a different perspective about the golf business. It has nothing to do with growing grass, but it's one all need to understand and heed.

Rooney is, perhaps, the leading expert on the demographics of golf. Who plays? How often? Where? Why? At a time when courses are competing for business more fiercely than ever, his perspective has become critical for facilities and manufacturers alike. That's why he's become such a sought-after consultant.

Rooney was a high school jock back in post-WWII Kankakee, Ill., but he never touched a golf club until he got a college job life-guarding at the local country club and started playing on Mondays. He finished school in 1961 at Illinois State University with a bachelor's degree thinking he wanted to teach and coach.

Rooney married, started a family and finished his Ph.D. at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., at a time when doctoral degrees weren't as common as divots on a par-3 tee box. He taught at the University of Wyoming – which featured a geography department full of fellow golf junkies – where the idea of studying the geography of sports arose.

"I picked up a program from one of the Wyoming football games and noted that only about five of the players were actually from Wyoming," he says. "I realized that recruiting was the key to a college program's success and nobody had really researched where all the good players came from. That was the beginning of my first study of the geography of sports."

With piles of data from the NCAA and other sources, he soon began writing and teaching about the subject and eventually published two seminal books that still are used as references today.

By 1969, he'd bounced around teaching at several universities before he was recruited to start the geography department at Oklahoma State University, where he remained for the rest of his career. His coursework on the geography of sports was popular, and his students included Tour pro Scott Verplank, Henry DeLozier, the current president of the NGCOA and golf photographer Mike Klemme.

Rooney's business insights were equally popular, and he began consulting with the NGF, the PGA of America, Golf Digest and major industry corporations to help them gather and analyze data to understand the market more effectively. He also partnered with his son, Dan (see page 108) to buy and operate golf courses, adding reality to the academic study of the subject.

Now retired from teaching, Rooney devotes himself full-time to operating his course in Grand Haven, Mich., and helping the golf business un-

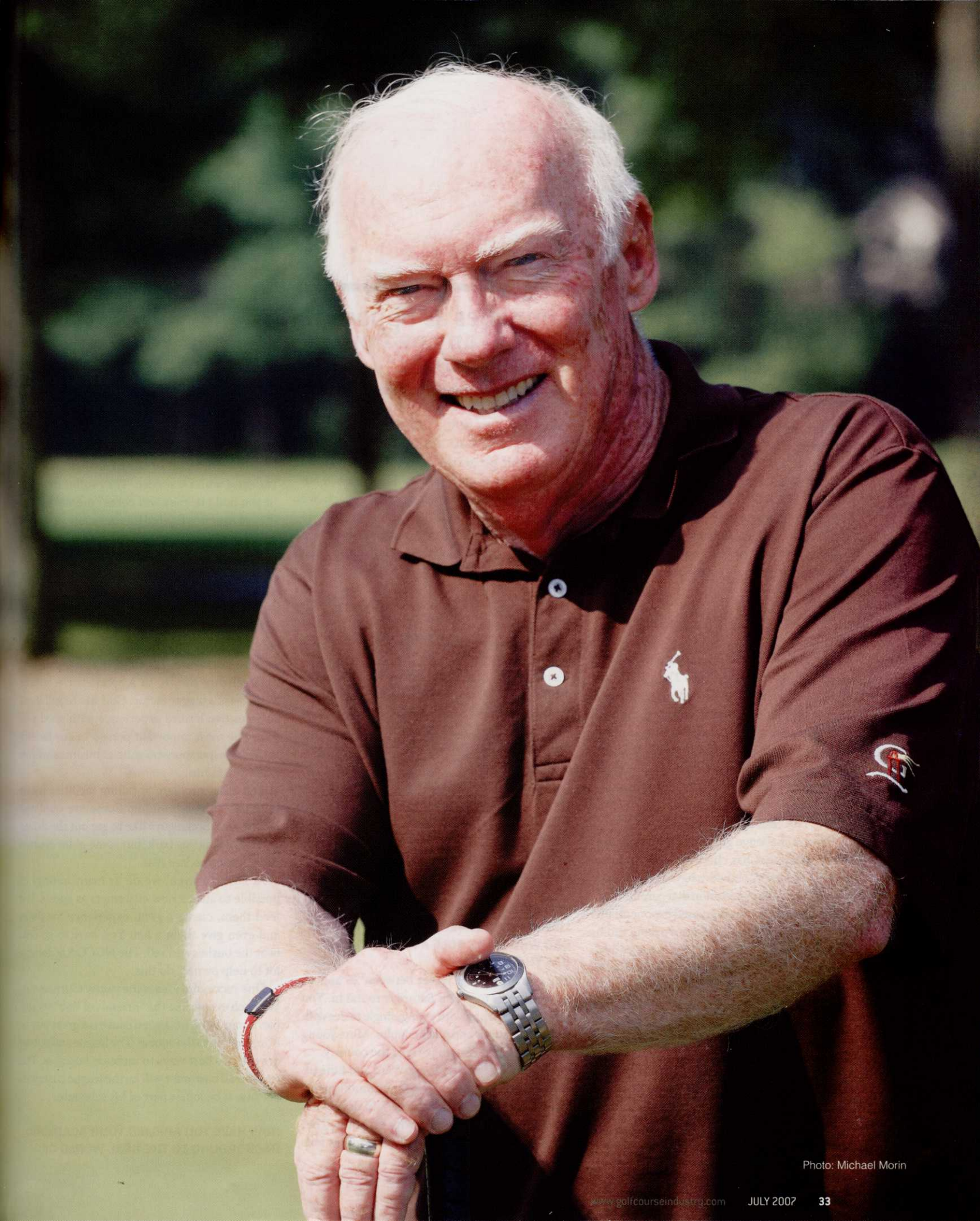


Photo: Michael Morin

“Some people work on hunches as opposed to information. It’s a pitfall any owner can be victim to.” - JOHN ROONEY

derstand the market forces that drive success and failure.

WHAT ARE THE KEYS TO SUCCESS IN MODERN GOLF COURSE DEVELOPMENT?

If I’m working for a client, particularly a developer, the key to success is location, innovative management and proper capitalization. It’s difficult to overcome a bad location. It can be done, but it’s rare.

WHAT’S THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THE INDUSTRY?

I look at the business today, and there’s good stuff and disturbing stuff out there. The good is the aging of the population. From a demographic perspective, the boomers should assist in the growth of the game for at least another 20 years. But, there’s increasing competition for their leisure time. Many boomers are committed to the game, but others still need to be coaxed into playing.

WHAT’S THE BAD NEWS?

The biggest challenge golf faces right now is in the age group that has children between 5 and 18. Those children’s activities have become more organized, and the expectation that parents be involved in their lives has increased exponentially. There’s been a decline of play. Working moms factor into this too. Golf has to figure out a way to reach these people. If we don’t reach them now, it’ll be difficult to reach them later.

The other thing that’s getting in the way is that we’re a mobile society. The average businessperson works an hour more a day than 10 years ago because of e-mail and cell phones. That’s five hours a week. That’s a round of golf.

Kid’s soccer probably has done more to harm golf participation than any other factor. As long as parents are expected to attend the games and other things, golf will suffer.

CAN’T WE JUST SUCK THOSE SOCCER PLAYERS INTO GOLF PROGRAMS?

Junior golf programs aren’t necessarily the answer. They’re great and well-intentioned but won’t necessarily have a long-term impact. We need to make sure kids have an opportunity to participate. Only 55 percent of high schools even have golf programs. Golf for kids is flat compared to lacrosse, soccer, volleyball, etc.

HOW CAN YOU GET MOM AND DAD ON THE COURSE?

If you can get them to make the game part of their organized schedule – make it a priority – even if it’s just a nine-hole league once a week, it makes a difference. Those nine-hole league players usually eat and drink as much as an 18-hole player. That league culture doesn’t exist in much of the country. We need to transfer that idea to grow participation.

Believe it or not, we have a much greater supply relative to participation. Access to the game is greater than it’s ever been. It’s a negative to the owner, but for the golfer, it’s a positive. The down market is providing more access, affordability, discounting, etc.

THE AVERAGE CUSTOMER USED TO BE LIKE WARD CLEAVER, THE TRADITIONAL DAD WHO MADE GOLF A PRIORITY. WHY HAS THAT CHANGED?

The average Ward Cleaver between 25 and 45 now struggles to get his Saturday round in. You have to replace him with young, single males with fewer obligations and older couples. More young kids also play in certain parts of the country.

Leagues are one way to get Ward and June involved because it’s a smaller time commitment. The other thing to do is pick a certain time of the week where kids play free with an adult. That helps to get more of the younger families out.

It’s a long-term play ... you won’t make much money, but you’ll build a customer base.

There are still guys like Ward Cleaver who use golf as part of their business. They’re important, but we need them to encourage others to go out with them occasionally. I’ve always been able to attract my friends to the game by scheduling an event or just dragging them to the golf course.

WHICH FACILITIES ARE FAILING BECAUSE THEY’VE IGNORED MARKET CHANGES?

The ones with no service. They suffer from the “if you build it, they will come” mentality. The PGA of America figured this out a few years ago. It encouraged its members to become “customer development people” and teachers. There’s been a marked change of professionals’ attitudes at facilities that are doing well because they’ve heard this message, and they’re heeding it.

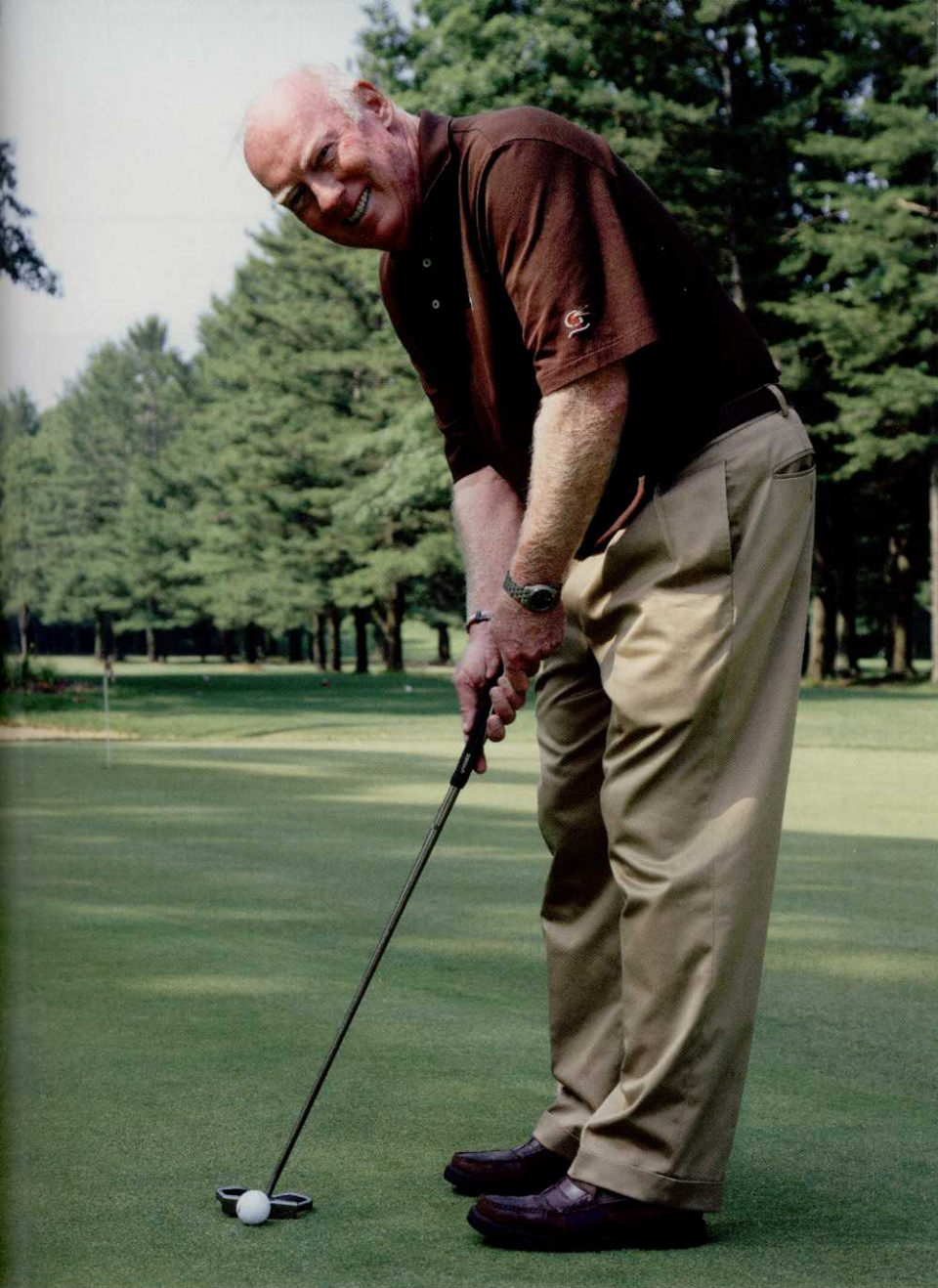
There are oversupplied markets where discounting is hurting. Rounds might be OK, but revenues decrease. Location is one factor, but not realizing they’re in a competitive leisure business is a bigger factor. Golf has to sell itself as a positive leisure experience with good service. The most important person in any facility is that salesperson who solicits business within a 30-mile radius.

The other problem at failing facilities is not investing in conditioning. Some are outdated by distance. Some guys like to get out the driver and let the big dog bark, but some older courses can’t accommodate that.

At Grand Haven, we do as many outings as possible to attract new customers as guests. We feed them, create a great experience for them and even give them a hat. You have to go out, beat the bushes and sell. The NGCOA is doing a lot to help owners do this.

One successful idea is the vanity tournament. We push events like the “Friends of Bob” scramble. Scrambling for a good cause is a great way to bring people to the course. The league and outing are the two best ways to increase business. The traditional customer will be the league customer because it becomes part of his schedule.

HOW HAVE YOU APPLIED YOUR ACADEMIC BACKGROUND TO THE REAL WORLD OF



Database development and management is one of the biggest trends in the industry, says John Rooney. Photo: Michael Morin

DO LARGE-SCALE PLAYER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS WORK?

Programs like The First Tee work, but it's at such a small scale, it won't make a huge difference in the long term. Offering special events, getting people out to the facility that wouldn't normally come out and advertising clinics are what bring people out. Play Golf America can work, but it's site specific. The same is true with Bring Your Daughter to the Course Week. Programs like that are only as good as the execution at the local level. If there's no follow through, they don't work.

We do something with juniors – we have about 100 kids in a two-week or six-week program – but we insist the parents accompany them for a Sunday golf day. About 60 percent of the parents do it.

The golf league is the best promotion you can use. Leagues come in all shapes and sizes, and you need to have a mix. Michigan has a golf league championship. It's the kind of activity that overcomes those barriers – time, opportunity, etc. – and it's fun. We'll have a league event, and then we'll have post-round contests. It's a way to encourage people to spend more time, more money and have more fun.

Another example is packaging a Nine and Dine promotion. Offer a steak dinner and golf for a set price. I met a guy from Ohio who's doing this, and he's just packed with customers.

HOW IMPORTANT ARE SUPERINTENDENTS TO THE SUCCESS OF A FACILITY?

They're the focal point the business revolves around. It's a complicated business, but first and foremost, it's about growing grass. If you don't do that, the rest doesn't happen. The superintendent who does a great job of producing a great product makes everyone else's job easier. They also need to be ambassadors to the customers. They need to meet and greet like everyone else does. We have a suggestion box just for the superintendent. Most of the suggestions are ridiculous, but every once in a while there's something good. **GCI**

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OWNING A GOLF COURSE?

We use analytical techniques to understand the operation better from the expense and revenue sides. As a social scientist and demographer, we've polled people about likes and dislikes. That's important. You need to find about attitudes. We're constantly collecting data about the customers. We want to know who they are, where they play, how often they play, and we offer them incentives to collect e-mail addresses. One of the biggest trends in the industry is database development and management.

Sometimes people still work on hunches as opposed to information. It's a pitfall any owner can be victim to.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR COMPANY, THE LONGITUDES GROUP.

Our system tries to help organizations know

more about their customer base and increase it appropriately. Say we want to analyze the sales of golf company XYZ that sells putters. Our first action is to look at its sales by zip code. We compare that to what we know about demand by zip code from our database. We give them share of market – expected vs. real. That gives it a geographic representation of how well it's achieving its potential. We try to get the company's sales territories to match with reality.

Our demand database and GIS software are powerful tools. Oftentimes, the companies' databases aren't good. The same is true with golf courses. We ask managers, "Who are your customers, and where are they coming from?" and they don't know. We also run into many groups who know everything. They say, "There's nothing you can tell me." It's this know-it-all attitude that's the worst thing for most facilities.