Clubhouses Weathered Stormy Year by Letting Managers Manage

By JACK FULTON, JR.

WHAT SORT of a year has 1931 been for house operation? Will the nation's clubs take it on the chin financially or will the battle be a draw? Club officials and club managers, familiar with conditions in their own little bailiwicks, are wondering what their neighbors and the country as a whole will report after annual statements are out. They are wondering because they hope to draw important conclusions from the full returns and expect to plan next year's actions on the recognizable trends of this season's progress.

Beginning in mid-September, scores of letters have been sent from GOLFDOM's office to managers all over the country, asking how 1931 house nets in their districts were going to compare with 1930 figures, what falling off there has been in memberships, what concessions in membership price the clubs have made this year to maintain full rosters, how the green-fee volume compares with a year ago, and other similar questions.

The replies received are necessarily incomplete at press time. For many managers, the active season is not yet over. None reported the release of his annual statement and many of them cautioned that what information they were sending must be taken as an estimate of the year and not as final facts. Whether this indicates that the managers hope the returns will be better than they expected or fear they may be worse, it is hard to say. Possibly it is merely a case of playing safe.

Member-Slump Varies

Nevertheless, certain definite trends are apparent. Foremost is the fact that the private clubs of the nation have fewer members than listed a year ago, although it appears that the number of *active* members has not greatly changed. It is safe to estimate that not one club in 50 has a full roster today. The percentage of slump-off from last season varies with the section of the country, the Detroit and New York districts appearing to be the hardest hit. Some Detroit authorities believe the district's average will approach 20 per cent; however, this is the most pessimistic view, the concensus believing 15 per cent to be a truer figure.

New York appears to be spotty. Some clubs in the district have held their membership total to the 1930 level through aggressive selling campaigns and reductions in initiation fees.

Chicago reports about a 10 per cent deficiency in number of allowable members. Cleveland figures about the same. St. Louis estimates are placed at about 8 per cent as are the returns from Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

Better maintenance of 1930 levels are reported from New England, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and the Pacific Northwest. California's season of big play is just beginning and so cannot be considered in this article. The same applies to the southern half of the U. S.

Normal Loss, but Sales Harder

One manager furnishes an interesting explanation of this member loss. It is, he points out, not a direct, but an indirect result of the depression-hysteria of today. It is not a case of golfers dropping their club affiliations because they can no longer afford them, in his opinion, and he backs up his contention by pointing out that in any year the normal turnover of memberships due to deaths, removals, resignations, etc., will not be far from 10 per cent.

Instead, he believes the loss is the result of the difficulty experienced by membership committees in their efforts to replace the normal turnover with new faces. In final analysis golf is a luxury and many a man who had the money and in normal times would not have objected to being put up for membership in the club of his choice, this year decided he was not sufficiently sure of what the future held for him and he had better not find himself committed to additional expenditures. He delayed joining.

That was the reason for the member-slump, this manager believes. It was not an increase in resignations; it was rather a decrease in memberships sold. He says fewer men joined golf clubs in 1931 than in any year in the past five.

Picture Not All Gloom

The pessimistic side of GOLFDOM's research is almost entirely covered by the above. The rest of the picture is reasonably bright and cheerful. For example, few clubs failed to include and insist upon radical economies in their 1931 budgets. They entered the season with full knowledge that 1931's attendance volume would probably be under the previous year and they adjusted their plans accordingly—eliminating employes where they could be spared, cutting salaries when the cut was justified, reducing the extent, and thereby the expense, of non-revenue producing activities wherever possible, and delaying until more stable times the start of capital improvements that were not essential to the club's 1931 well-being.

Further, managers were ordered to watch pennies as closely as they had formerly guarded dollars, were required to buy for immediate needs only, to eliminate waste in all departments, especially the kitchen, and to simplify the routine organization of the club so that the maximum number of employes would have the minimum amount of idle time between the week-end peaks of rush business.

Income, Costs, Both Down

What has been the result of this nationwide economy program? It is a real pleasure to report that all indications point to a season about like last year. Total business is down, but so are costs, and the year is going to end with few clubs any worse off than twelve months ago. Those that were in the red at the close of 1930 will for the most part be in the red this year also, but no deeper. Those that returned a profit apparently will do so again. And the ones which broke even a year ago will come so near repeating that their losses will at worst have only a slight pinkish tinge.

If the returns on this inquiry can be depended on as a national average of conditions, the year has been a valuable one in pointing out to club officials and executives the economies possible with concerted effort. In the past few years the structure of country clubs has grown more and more complex with the seasons and the average layout, not offering all manner of activities in addition to golf, was liable to lose prestige. Emphasis was being placed on the social side of club life. Money was being broadcast for ritz and brass buttons. There were some clubs at which golf was becoming of secondary interest.

This year has taught many clubs that an orgy of spending is not vital to club success. It has taught them that the luxury of a Russian ex-count to open the clubhouse portals is not a factor in the puttability of the greens or the palatability of the dining room steaks.

This does not mean that clubs are now offering golf and nothing else. They still schedule dances and card parties, and continue to maintain tennis courts and swimming pools. But it does mean that the dances are to five-piece orchestras instead of ten-man aggregations, that first prize in the women's six-week bridge tourney is a \$25 electric clock rather than a \$100 wrist watch, and so on. Lack of member complaint at this retrenchment has proved most educational not only to many boards of governors, but to no small number of managers as well.

Letting Right Man Steer

If club managers were ever in a sweet spot, they are in it today. In the past few years, under the influence of ritz and prosperity, many a board of governors has gone ahead in its own sweet, unbusinesslike way over the protest of the club manager with "improvements" that were thoroughly unjustified in the light of the club's financial condition. And strangely, most of these "improvements" worked out, under the influence of easy money and good times. Boards began to discount the value of their managers' advice, since few board-born projects failed. Why, then, pay the manager so much salary. There was an obvious trend toward replacing experienced managers with cheaper men.

The past year has corrected all that. Sailing suddenly became less smooth for the ship of state. The governors found themselves running into snags which formerly they had cleared easily in the swift current of prosperity. Moreover, the proper channel ahead was nowhere near as wide as it had been. They needed a pilot, and they turned—to the manager, whose experience and advice they found a great deal more valuable than they had thought. Today, there is little talk of cutting managers' salaries, because the clubs realize his importance in a club's well-being.

A matter of financial nature had its effect on the results of the year, this item being a general reduction in interest charges. Where bond issues and short term obligations came due, they were for the most part paid up or else re-financed at a lower interest rate. And at the same time, few clubs increased their funded debt. It is estimated that 18-hole clubs today average $1,500 less interest charges annually than was the case in 1929, and reductions are expected to continue each year for some time to come. This had considerable to do with the showing of the year.

Under existing conditions, it is difficult to regard the future of our country clubs in anything but the most optimistic vein. They came through a difficult year in splendid fashion, due principally to intelligent application of economy measures, in spite of increased competition from daily-fee and municipal courses, and in spite of a late season's start and excess week-end rains in early summer that for a time, if they continued, threatened to cut attendance to a hitherto unexperienced minimum.

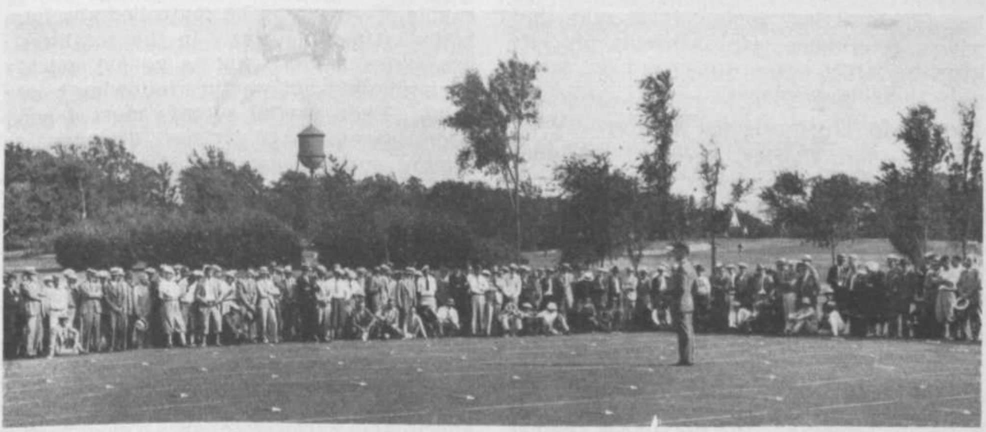
What lies ahead in 1932 will be more obvious a month or two from now, after the season ends and the annual statements are in. All that need be emphasized now is that the bell for the 1931 round finds the clubs still on their feet—and not pulling their punches.

Green Section Meetings Have Record Attendance

OLD DAYS when the Green section held a single annual meeting with an attendance of 50 to 80 men paled in light of the 1931 meetings the section held at various experimental plots. More than 1,000 men attended these affairs, examined the experimental plots and exchanged notes on trials and triumphs during the tearful season.

The biggest Green section meeting ever held was that at the Mill Road farm experimental plots, August 31. More than 400 course superintendents and greenkeepers studied the work done there under the close supervision of C. A. Tregillus, superintendent for A. D. Lasker, owner of the Mill Road estate. John Monteith, Jr., and Ken Welton of the Section and Tregillus went through the details of the work and results at the outdoor meeting. Ganson Depew, chairman of the Green section, W. D. Vanderpool, former chairman; Guy Peters, chairman of the Chicago district golf association green section; Col. John Morley, president, N. A. G. A.; Alex Pirie, honorary president of the P. G. A., and Herb Graffis, editor GOLFDOM, spoke at the dinner given at Knollwood C. C., following the outdoor session.

LANDSCAPING is important. The finest golf layout in the world may lack interest if the surroundings are unpleasant, while a mediocre course appeals a great deal to the majority when the backgrounds and vistas are well thought out.



John Monteith, Jr., of Green Section, explains test plot performance at Mill Road Farm station during record-sized meeting of course superintendents and green-chairmen.