

Higher Costs; More Play, on Golf's Card for 1934

By HERB GRAFFIS*

IN ANY sport you know what the score is. Not 10% of the 5,728 golf clubs in the United States can tell you right now what their score is financially.

Most of them have figures and on that account think they are operating on a business basis. A lot of the banks had figures, too, but they folded like bridge tables because they had been operating with figures that were just marks on paper, and really didn't tell them the story.

The mystifying part of golf club operation is that so many officials who would ask for the immediate resignation—in disgrace—of any member who habitually marked down the wrong score, continue to countenance club operating and accounting methods that do not accurately tell the club's financial score.

About four years ago, Professor Dickinson and I made a brain-trust experiment in one phase of golf club figures, course maintenance costs. We attempted to get cost percentages for the various divisions of maintenance work.

Editor Catches Hell

What had interested me in this research was the howls of criticism and abusive complaints that followed the publication of every story GOLFDOM had run mentioning specific figures of course maintenance costs. We could print plenty of paragraphs reminding readers that conditions at courses made costs widely varying, but when some chairman read that an 18-hole course was being maintained for \$10,000 a year, his greenkeeper would be put on the rug because his own course cost \$20,000 a year to maintain. This happened notwithstanding the fact that the \$20,000 might have represented greater results and economy than the \$10,000 expenditure.

We kept trying to tell the greenkeepers that their defense and opportunity was to have enough accurate data on the areas, conditions and costs of maintenance to show the picture clearly and convincingly to their chairmen and officials. By having that data in its complete form they would

be able to show their employers first of all that the greenkeeper's job is complex, and second, that each detail of the job was precisely under the supervision of a competent and conscientious greenkeeper. The answers all would come out in dollars and cents and square feet and pH's, some of which the chairman would be able to understand and all of which would show him that the greenkeeper knew what the score was.

Well, some of the boys must have figured that that was good enough in farming was good enough in greenkeeping. The farmers, most of them, never knew what the score was.

Some of them lost their jobs. When anything goes wrong the club can't ask the officials to throw in their memberships, but someone has to be canned to appease the critics. Figures would have saved them.

During the recent years of acute depression course maintenance costs have been reduced approximately 40% at the usual type of 18-hole clubs. Not all of this reduction has been sound, by a long way. Memberships have started on the upturn. Members are rejoining clubs and the clubs whose courses are weedy, untidy and obviously suffering from penny-wise and pound-foolish shortsight are due for an agonizing delay in recovery.

Cost Percentages Checked

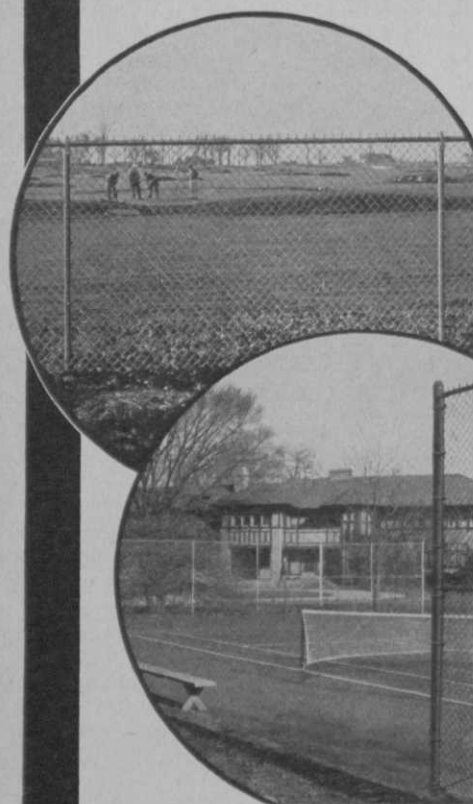
When the Massachusetts Agricultural College and GOLFDOM collaborated in a research into course maintenance costs, there was determined the following percentages of the maintenance dollar as allotments to the various sectors of cost:

Labor, 71%; upkeep material (seed, fertilizer, chemicals, balance), 12.4%; machinery operation, 7.0%; water system and drainage, 2.8%; new equipment, 3%.

Those percentages have been checked against the annual statements of about 200 clubs, covering 1932 and 1933 operations and they stand up well, as near as anyone can determine from the widely varying methods of accounting employed

*Amherst Recreational Conference Address.

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by the clubs whose statements were examined. Of course, the matter of fairway watering has begun to figure in to such an extent that the charge of 2.8% for water and drainage is too low as a representative figure and machine maintenance success is reducing the labor percentage.

Unfortunately there is such a lack of data concerning watering costs and factors governing watering that the whole golf field is still pretty much in the dark. John Monteith, Jr., estimated last year that the golf clubs of southern California spent about \$100,000 more for water per season than approved turf culture methods warranted.

Other estimates, based on Monteith's figures on the California situation, guess the national annual excess costs of fairway watering at \$1,000,000.

You can safely figure that even in a tough year like 1933 the money not only thrown away for watering, but actually spent in injury to the turf, was approximately 3% of the total annual maintenance bill of \$33,000,000.

Greenkeepers Strive to Save

Don't think the greenkeepers did this to make the wheels go around on the sprinklers. They have attempted to argue against the demands of players for greens so soft that any sort of an approach shot would stick. The greenkeeper is a smarter guy than is he given credit for being. That is, I think he is, and he certainly is educating himself.

In many places this winter there have been short courses for greenkeepers, attended by a number of fellows who have been paid as low as \$900 a year to have the responsibility for plant operation involving a capital investment of \$200,000. These men, out of that \$900 have paid their own expenses to these short courses, so they'll be able to keep their courses in better condition for less money. Time will tell whether these fellows have proved, by their foresight, to be smart as money-makers for themselves.

Their officials, if their factory foremen getting so little money, had spent part of it for education advancing the business, probably would fall into a faint. That's one of the reasons why I say that golf clubs properly are run on a better basis when they have a policy of sportsmanship such as the greenkeepers in attendance at these short courses show, rather than cold dollars and cents, as the governing factor.

There were, as near as I can figure out,

about 75,000 people, excluding the caddies, employed by American golf clubs, last year.

Golf Workers on Charity

The number of these, especially trained course employes, who were compelled to live on charity during the last two winters, is to my way of thinking, something that club officials should correct. I know of cases where men who own (or did own) little houses near wealthy clubs, who are trying to raise families decently, and who have devoted from 5 to 15 years learning the tricks of proper watering, application of fertilizers and fungicides and mowing—all of which are more delicate and exacting jobs than the average club member appreciates—have had salaries cut to 20 cents and 25 cents an hour for an 8 months' season. The pay was fixed as being the figure at which labor, in desperation, must work. No great thought was given to loyalty, training or sportsmanship. The wage was set as a benevolent act on the part of the golf club board. I say that fellows who have set that coolie wage haven't been taught all that golf is supposed to teach.

Golf clubs have been fooling themselves because they haven't known the score in this matter of labor. Now with government work offering 40c, 50c and upward per hour for labor, you can look to the costs of course maintenance rising sharply in 1934.

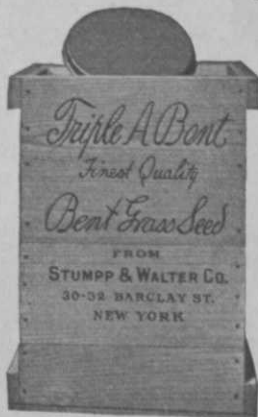
20% Course Cost Increase

Greenkeepers will have to study the possibilities of reducing mowing and maintenance areas on greens, tees, fairways and traps to keep their expenses down. They will have to have figures in advance to present their labor problem or they will be laid across the barrel plenty, in accordance with the time-honored practice. I know of no case of a well operated course where the labor cost—even with the merciless hacking of the rate of pay and with the stringent curtailment of other items in the expense budget—has been less than 50%.

So you can figure out that with the necessity of competing with the national and state government scale on labor for at least 50% of your course maintenance expense and this scale being frequently a 40% increase over what many of the courses have paid, there is a promise of a 20% increase in course maintenance expense by anybody's simple arithmetic.

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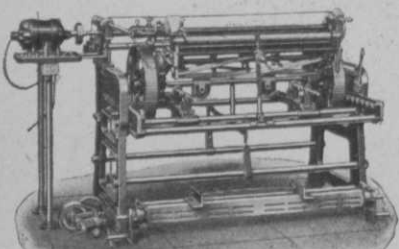
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The equipment manufacturers have been losing money for so long that their continued existence and initiative in expensive development work has been nothing short of marvelous. However, the golf club officials and greenkeepers don't realize that, and the manufacturers have been engaged in such keen competition that they forgot the score was being kept in figures that showed up worse the end of each recent year. Their code is going to help them keep score.

Liquor to Help in House

So, all around your course you will have marked increases of costs in 1934. In the clubhouse you will have the competition of wages established by hotel and restaurant codes. Nobody can say for a certainty until license fees and other matters are definitely set, just how much of a beneficial factor liquor is going to be. Judging from early indications, and from the experience with beer at many of the clubs where repeal was not anticipated by the club's own operating practices, I am extremely cheerful about liquor sales helping out the clubs financially as well as improving the club spirit in more ways than one.

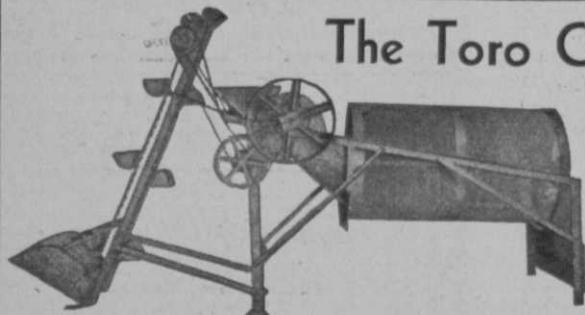
It will do private golf clubs considerable good to have some of their important members and officials get good generous slugs of wholesome alcohol under their

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belts and begin to glow with a sentiment for spending some money. We have gone so wild in our anxiety to disprove the statement that golf is a rich man's game that we have been inclined to forget that golf costs money, just like the movies, the automobile and the C. W. A.

Club Turn Daily Fee

There was a recorded increase of 154 in the daily fee 18-hole courses over the two-year period. Sixty-eight of these were formerly private clubs. How many more private clubs are operating on almost a pay-as-you-play basis for all comers, heaven only knows. They haven't realized that every time a private course takes in fee play it is eliminating the inducement that gets people to join private clubs. The private clubs, not knowing what their product costs, are competing against each other in a blind, price-cutting campaign that is further retarding recovery of the private club situation. Why the various district golf associations, with three exceptions, have done nothing to attempt to handle this dangerous competition is something I can't answer.

When a private club turns daily fee it reduces by hundreds the number of people who are prospective private club members in the community.

There were around 93,000,000 rounds of golf played in 1931. In 1933 there were less than 50,000,000 rounds played. These figures are based on caddie tickets and municipal fee course records.

Women Detoured Big Slump

You can not possibly figure more than 2,000,000 men and women as active golf players last year as against 2,400,000 in 1929. Both of these figures do not include caddies, who number around 800,000. Had it not been for the continued increase of women's golf during the depression the number of active golfers in 1933 would have been well under the 2,000,000 mark. Women's golf, as near as I can learn from professionals at all kinds of clubs all over the country, has increased 20% each year of the depression.

Less than 6% of the urban white population between the ages of 20 and 64 play golf. There are 5,600,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 20 going to school in urban districts in the United States. These figures are from the 1930 census. They indicate golf has some room for growth.



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