

Steering Tomorrow's Course for Golf Business

By DON YOUNG

GOLF IS a cockeyed business!

Such a statement, although expressed rather frequently and vigorously by pros, greenkeepers, manufacturers, and players alike, is hardly an accurate one. However, sober perusal of the game's history since its inception in America uncovers plenty of evidence on which to base such an opinion.

Golf is a business, a profession, a sport, or a social excuse, depending entirely on one's contact with the game. As a business it is one of the most remarkable America has ever known. In spite of, until recent years, untrained administration, lack of planning, under-and-over-financing, and a host of other "don'ts" that are usually quick death to any ordinary business undertaking, golf has not only grown by leaps and bounds but today ranks, for all ages from 8 to 80, as America's leading sport.

Most assuredly there can't be too much "cock-eyed" with any activity that has attained such a remarkable expansion under so many severe handicaps.

A snap summing-up of golf's history in America shows it passing through its growing pains during the teens, suffering a severe adolescent period through the '20's, and finally emerging in the '30's, following the depression, with a sobered front and enough wild experience behind it to impress upon its devotees that there might possibly be something to the game other than beating a ball through eighteen fairways as an excuse for finally arriving at the 19th hole. Happily, this opinion has steadily gained momentum, and through the help of such bodies as the USGA, the PGA, the GSA, and various sectional organizations, much has been done the past ten years to establish golf on a business basis.

That much more is desirable goes without saying. Recently another organization, the American Golf Foundation, has entered the field as business counsel for America's golf clubs.

Unfortunately, golf has suffered from the personal complex. All of us, pros, greenkeepers, manufacturers, club officials,

and players have been far too inclined, as groups, to take what we could get out of the game personally—and to hell with the rest of it. Quite surprisingly, in spite of this selfish attitude, golf has produced no great fortunes or monopolies. It has, however, produced great personal honors; all of them, happily, well deserved.

Nevertheless, players as a group have been much inclined to take as a matter of course finer and more elaborate clubhouses and clubhouse services; thick, beautifully-manicured fairways, well-nigh perfect putting surfaces, improved playing equipment, and many other features that cost real time, money, and ingenuity. Quite often these improvements have appeared gradually with very little actual rap at the player's pocketbook, an item he fails to consider. At any rate, the average player never falters in his demand for improvement in any department. He seldom gives thought to whether the man making such improvements possible is being suitably rewarded financially for his effort. He is, though, unstinting in his praise when occasion demands—and he is on his game.

Some manufacturers do a bang-up job, with the good of the game at heart—and manage a yearly financial statement in black while doing so. Others, with too little thought of either the past or future, follow the lines of least resistance. Most any vendor of racket specialties can obtain a price list of their product, and it is of little concern to them whether the guy in the corner bookstore knows a No. 2 iron from a stymie. As long as he can sell some stuff, regardless of the deal, he's okay by them. In their defense, however, it must be recognized that these manufacturers as a group face the necessity of marketing a seasonal product in a field with distribution channels not too clearly defined. It also must be recognized that many of them have crimson financial statements at the end of the year.

Club officials, in the past, have as a group been greatly inclined toward disregarding the soundness or unsoundness of any financial venture the club might

be considering. Fortunately this situation is of necessity correcting itself. However, club officials as a group today fail to recognize that a capable club manager, pro, greenkeeper, even though costing somewhat more than the club budget seemingly allows, very often is the means of foregoing additional financing. They fail to recognize the necessity of rewarding ability in their golf club in the same manner they do in their own business.

The fault of course is easily understood. The average club official lacks inclination to apply sound business principles to his relaxation after having spent the entire day applying them to his own business—a perfectly human frailty. Which leads one to wonder if the average golf club would not, perhaps, be much better counselled by a capable three-man Board that could spare the time for such a job—instead of the unwieldy Boards of eight to 18 men who quite often spend the monthly meetings in argument and bickering, small clique against small clique, actually accomplishing little or nothing—and finally ending in a session of poker.

Pros and greenkeepers can in some ways be classed as a group; certainly so in their petty grievances. Each is far too inclined to view the other askance and with distrust—usually with a sour mental reservation as to the other's ancestry. One feels the other might not only be undermining him to the Board of Directors but is actually after his job. The result is a lack of departmental cooperation—the life-blood of a golf club. Everyone suffers in the final analysis.

Pros, to their everlasting credit, have probably done as much or more than any single group to advance the game—and at the same time have done surprisingly little to advance themselves. The playing pro, as a group, has done a whale of a job acquiring national and international recognition for himself, but in doing so has failed to secure a compensation equivalent with such recognition.

The club pro has likewise missed the bus. While laboring diligently on the home front he has, as a group, failed to realize that although he may be a howling success as a pro to his members, if he is to be as successful financially he must first, last, and always be a business man to himself—and to his club. As a result his crown as king of the golf market has slipped slightly askew. Instead of taking definite steps to correct the situation he has, often, become soured on the whole situation and adopted an injured air of persecution—an attitude that certainly corrects nothing. Far too many pros, who in the past have assumed the professional attitude that they could do

no wrong, are suddenly beginning to realize that very little of what they have done has been right. The general awakening, when it comes, should prove refreshingly beneficial.

The pro field in general allowed itself, through a lack of aggressiveness and application of sound business sense, to acquire an undeserved reputation as both an unsound distribution channel and credit risk. The correction of this trouble lies entirely within the pros themselves, and is a job that cannot be accomplished by merely taking a fatalistic view of the situation and hoping for the best. The war has given them a splendid opportunity to again gain merchandising domination in the golf market, and the pros should grasp this opportunity with every intelligent professional and business means in their power.

This unsoundness in the pro field is particularly evident throughout suburban and rural areas, where the small and medium-size clubs abound, and the pros themselves cannot be too severely criticized for the situation.

Too often the club is under-financed, stays open only part of the year, pays quite a small salary, and its marketing opportunities naturally are limited. The pro manages a fair living during the active season and does a swell job of loafing the rest of the year. Such a situation is not conducive to good club administration, good professionalism, good pro merchandising, nor the establishment and maintenance of good pro credit. Neither, by the way, is it good for the game of golf.

Pros in such situations have the answer to that problem running up and down their backbones. The small-club pro is a good promoter—if he isn't he will not long be a pro. If he will, and the word "will" is used advisedly, he can lead his Board of Directors and club into a year-round program that will provide him a steady job and income, and make his club an institution of real value—not only to his community but to the entire golf field as well.

Greenkeepers, "the forgotten men of golf", have truly in the past been just that. For years they labored diligently behind the scenes doing a splendid job without recognition, even Webster for years refusing them occupational rating in the dictionary. Fortunately this situation has changed to some degree. The Greenskeeping Superintendents' Assn. has awakened greenskeepers to the fact that their job requires not only a great deal of technical skill but is capable of supporting a professional rating as well. The result has been a decisive and progressive step in course maintenance, and a splendid

job of promoting public recognition of the greenkeeping profession. All of this is good for golf.

The modern greenkeeper of today has learned, through bitter experience, to temper abundantly available professional and lay advice with good common sense when he applies such advice to his local conditions. His importance in the future golf picture probably rests in his ability to raise his professional standing to the level of his technical and administrative skill. The necessity of his being in close touch at all times with club finances and activities is unquestioned, but more impressive evidence of executive ability in his field is urgently needed.

Another great need in his field is the broader education of club officials, as well as the golfing public, to the fact that the maintenance of fine grasses for golfing purposes is a somewhat forced and unnatural operation, and in doing so it is necessary to some extent to take obvious exceptions with the edicts of old Dame Nature. As a result the old girl can, and very often does, take a violent revenge under adverse weather conditions. Also that often some maintenance practice, although approved by authorities, proves eventually to be a basically fundamental mistake and often requires a considerable time to correct.

The day of the lawn mower, scythe, rake, and hunk of baling wire type of maintenance is gone. Today's and tomorrow's greenkeeper is an executive-technician and one of the most important figures in the whole setup. His club should be forced to realize that fact—by their greenkeeper.

Both the greenkeeper and the pro can do themselves and their professions, as well as the entire golf field, a great deal of good by shedding the cloak of mutual distrust both wear, forgetting their petty differences, (because they really have none) and putting this wasted energy of cordial dislike into their own jobs. There are, believe it or not, few golf clubs in America today that cannot support both a pro and a greenkeeper if each will properly look after his job.

Summing up then we find a peculiar condition in golf—a game that has grown and expanded tremendously in spite of many critical handicaps. Surely for it to have done so has required some martyrs. That these martyrs exist there can be no doubt—men who have unselfishly given time and money to the cause and received little but personal satisfaction in return. Very few have become well-known public figures.

The question is, what can be done? Unfortunately, no single answer will suffice.

However, were we all to take definite steps toward stabilizing golf as a business as well as a sport, the resulting improvement in all related activities would probably be amazing.

In examining the over-all situation we again find the weak spot in the suburban and rural areas. Metropolitan clubs today, as a whole, are well financed, well managed, and are a distinct asset to the entire golf field. Such clubs as prove otherwise, are being, and will continue to be, replaced by organizations of sound financial standing and business administration.

Again unfortunately, the metropolitan market is not great enough in itself to make a business venture in related lines attractive, profitable, and safe. Therefore, if we are to make the golf market a more attractive one, we must make it a larger market. Obviously our only hope to do so is to make our smaller clubs a sounder outlet for golf merchandise, supplies, equipment, and pro and greenkeeping services.

The job to do this would be a tremendous one—but it can be done. In fact, some definite steps, separately, have already been taken in that direction.

It is foolish for us to assume, as we have in the past, that this potential and tremendous small-club market cannot be made self-supporting and become an important part of the entire golf scheme. Each community where any small club exists supports many activities that are considered community assets. It is our job to make their golf club as much of a community asset as their high school gymnasium.

This will require a great deal of effort by all of us individually and a great deal of planning and administration by, let us say, a central body composed of a cross section of associations related to golf, manufacturers, and distributors. Its prime requisite should be education and actual definite assistance—not theory.

There is no logical reason why a golf club in a rural community cannot be maintained in as sound a condition as a metropolitan club. In fact, some favorable conditions exist at small clubs that are almost impossible to achieve in a metropolitan organization, such as close social contacts throughout the entire membership, community spirit, and strong, personal friendships. These are distant assets. The liabilities consist of great bewilderment as to how a golf club should be organized, built, and conducted.

Small clubs have seldom been organized originally strong enough financially and

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equipment breaks down at a course, they borrow another course's mower until they can get their own back running again.

"Frankly, we don't think Texas would enter into the picture regarding errors in maintenance judgment and loss of members because of same, as it hasn't happened here."

Tomorrow's Golf Business

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as a result are usually "half built" in the beginning. This under-financing is by no means always a direct result of economic conditions, but quite often the result of not knowing what is necessary. When the club has progressed to the point that its members realize what should have been done in the first place, they cast about for ways and means to do the job—and someone to do it. With the advice and help available to the small club today, they usually bob up with a phoney possessed of much conversation and little ability. Before too long the club is in worse shape than it was originally—and a distinct liability to the entire golf field.

Such situations are not necessarily isolated ones but exist to a quite large extent, generally speaking. It is a condition that can be corrected, and the correction should go far toward creating an additional, badly-needed market in golf.

This is not a job for an individual nor is it a job for any single group. It is a job for all of us interested in golf. Metropolitan club officials, club managers, pros, greenkeepers, and all associations related to golf should gladly cooperate in such an effort, with the firm knowledge that any benefits accruing therefrom will eventually benefit them personally through benefiting the entire golf field. Manufacturers and distributors should of course be greatly interested in a program designed to not only broaden their field of operation but possibly narrow their present channels of distribution, a costly item that has in the past been a distinct headache in the golf business. Small clubs, and their pros and greenkeepers, should welcome with open arms such a gesture of assistance that will tie them in as an integral part of the entire golf field, and should benefit greatly from it.

Our democratic economic system is based on active expansion, production, and distribution. It will be more pronounced than ever after the war, and golf certainly cannot escape its economic destiny in this scheme and continue to grow. To us then, who love the game or make our living from it, falls the duty of preparing the way for golf's great future.

Because golf, if we will help the future prove it, has just begun to grow.



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