

Pat Burke Shows How to Bring Small Club Back

By BOB CORRIGAN



PAT BURKE

Smethport CC, (Pa.)

Smethport, Pa., "Where the Game's the Thing," is an outstanding country club which has made a successful come back. The success occurred chiefly because Pat Burke, well and widely known from his years as pro at the Edgewater Gulf course in Biloxi, Miss., wanted to do it the hard way.

Pat came back from the Philippines after the war with a yearning to take over the management of a broken-down or torpid club, which he could build into a flourishing operation. He heard of the Smethport layout, which was not only torpid but dead,—having given up the ghost with a final 40 members in 1942,—took a good look at the white clubhouse and the snow and weeds around it and decided it was the place for him.

Burke loved the location, among hills practically infested with white-tail deer, famous for hunting and fishing in general, and blessed with a cool summer and a long, golden fall which usually keeps leaves on the trees until late in November. He saw great possibilities in the private hills and meadows of the 160-acre tract which had been the course, and lots of business rolling by on Highway 59 between Smethport and Bradford. He figured that the clubhouse, just off the road, would readily expand to accommodate members and guests from 50 miles around. In fact, he developed a real yen for the place. So Pat signed up with club president Hamlin D. Redfield of the Eldred Bank.

Since then, the working team of President Ham and pro-manager Pat has cooked up most of the many projects which make the club a success. For the pro-manager's part, it has meant a minimum 12-hour day, usually from around noon to around midnight, and every day.

The new beginning was in March of 1946, and before the snow was gone from the area Pat had a host of overlapping chores to get done. He had to find the course under the heavy outcrop of weeds

and grass gone wild. He had to get out and round up members, to stay home and oversee the clubhouse renovation, and to learn all about things like establishing and maintaining greens and fairways which previously, as a pro, he had been able to take for granted. Also, he had to stretch an initial budget of \$3,000 pretty thin to make a start.

In a year's time, the club was welcoming \$3,500 in greens fees alone; but that took some doing.

Early in the program Pat managed to get a pro shop opened in the clubhouse, and to put it where everybody could see it; where golfers on their way from locker room to first tee would have to pass through it. Business with golfers, he found, can be just as good in anticipation of use for the things they buy as at the time when they use them. Why not?

Attends Short Course

He got in on a short course at Penn State College on turf building and maintenance under Dr. Fred Grau of the Agronomy Department, now director of the USGA Green Section. When, with help from the club president and former members, it was possible to locate his greens he had the information to direct the necessary work on them. There was a lot of it, as will be described, and lots of long-distance toll charges were paid out for hurry calls back to Penn State for more dope.

At the same time, Pat was scurrying around to find key men and talk the club up in meetings at such towns as Warren, Port Allegany, Emporium, Kane and Bradford, Pa., and Olean, Limestone, and other New York border towns, including Wellsville, his home place. Annual memberships were pegged at \$24, about the price of a very modest evening at an average night club, and a few were given for skilled jobs and needed equipment around the club. Burke had records of former patrons of his own who were travelers and would remember him; these made a valuable mailing list.

When the season for play opened two years ago the club was ready for players. All the simultaneous requirements had been met, and members were welcomed to a fast but exacting 9-hole course. A membership drive succeeded to a present enrollment of 340.

Pat knew all his members by name, face and place of origin, and he saw to it that all knew each other. He never missed. To make sure, he kept up by continuous study of the membership list and checking his recollections every week.

For the physical plant, a good soil screen had been acquired and repaired, and about 500 tons of formula topsoil were turned out to cover the old greens six inches deep. That piece of machinery was worked by the power take-off of the tractor which pulled the fairway mowers, and pulled them right up over the tees which Pat had graded down to save mowing by hand. Colonial, Seaside and Redtop bent grass surfaced the greens, some of the Redtop being applied as plugs in places where the subsoil tended to push up. From those sod plugs it spread out among the other grasses to mat. By good luck, the fairways came clean without too much weeding or seeding.

The clubhouse was spruced up with new white paint and green trim. A few decorative touches were added inside, and the bar was modernized, stocked,—and set up with a price schedule to match the rates in town. Note the last item particularly: Burke believes the always-present competitive question between club and business establishment is solved only by charging prices in the club to equal or exceed those of the food-and-drink places in town.

"Members know," he says, "that their chits carry a profit which is important and necessary in running the club, and their patronage is repaid by the congenial private surroundings of their own choosing in place of the mixed public attendance in hotel or restaurant. People can relax in the club who can't afford to be seen in a barroom. Therefore, it is folly to allow cut prices for food or drink in the club, which would be the basis for a real grievance on the part of hotel and restaurant men."

Uses Student Help

The club was going, and to keep it going Burke had to break in and keep working a crew of schoolboy part-time helpers. The chief of them, Harold Irons of Smethport, in two seasons has become a capable green-keeper, and the mainstay of the barn-workshop which is the club's storage and repair room. When the other boys crack up machinery only superficially, he can put it back in shape. Generally, his supervision keeps serious accidents from happening.

The greens which at first had to be dis-harrowed to make them take the home-made surfacing, as outlined above, and which in some cases had to be drained by hand to stop flooding, in the second season were in prime condition. Even a deer could trot across one without trace,—and it was no novelty to have it happen. Part

of the gratifying effect came from the pro-manager's incentive pay system for the boys, by which one of them was assigned to a given hole and rewarded with a golf club or a \$10 bill for a weed-free green.

It is notable that the drought of 1947 burned no grass at Smethport. Sub-surface water and occasional irrigation from springs on the property kept the matted greens and fairways smooth and live.

Improvements of the second season included a new kitchen and dining room, enclosure of the ample back porch of the clubhouse, and the finishing and furnishing of a guestroom or two upstairs. Pennsylvania law allows overnight accommodation of guests within the clubhouse, but not in guest cabins. Otherwise, there would be some of those.

Winter Sports Added

Another improvement of 1947, an innovation, was the preparation on the grounds of a ski run nearly a mile long for the winter, and establishment of a skating rink handy to locker rooms, lounge and bar. Impounded water of the club is released from behind a dam to flood the rink, and the location makes the matter of drainage in the spring no problem.

Altogether, a little over \$20,000 was spent on the physical plant in the two seasons, and the result looks like a good \$100,000. Membership has come in from a radius reaching all the way to the outskirts of Buffalo, N. Y., and hunters wishing to top off their season with a little golf, or travelers passing through Smethport, have been delighted to make use of greens privileges. Driving range and practice green were set just behind the clubhouse, and lessons were held to \$3.00 an hour.

In 1947 a total of 2500 guest players used the course, paying greens fees of \$1.00 apiece, plus tax, on weekdays, and \$1.50, plus tax, on Sundays and holidays. Some came to play once around, and stayed to enjoy the club and the country for a week or more. All furnished highly valuable word-of-mouth advertising.

For August, 1947, a bi-State southpaw championship was arranged, intended by Pat to bring out competitors from New York and Pennsylvania. It turned out that of the 30 entrants a good many came from Ohio, too, so that Jim Henretta of Kane, Pa., who took the honors with a 77, really found himself a tri-State champion left-hander.

The Smethport Country Club is purely co-operative, owned by the members, and makes profits for no individual. It provides a living for Pat Burke and his help, and affords recreation and training at almost no cost to all age groups within a large area. It is a community asset.