

Al Ciuci, Professional Golf Selling Star for 35 Years

By JOHN M. BRENNAN

Back in 1914 when the Kaiser was dreaming of world conquest, a raw-boned 17-year-old Connecticut youngster was named professional at the nine-hole Weatogue CC in Bridgeport. Thirty-five years later, Al Ciuci guides the destiny of one of the most attractive pro shops in bunkerland at the swank Fresh Meadow CC in Great Neck, Long Island.

From his cozy office gaily decorated with blow-up photos of his favorites, including Gene Sarazen, whom he introduced to the game back in 1917 at the old Beardsley Park municipal links in Bridgeport, Ciuci not only presides over the tournaments held by the Metropolitan and Long Island PGA members, but teaches and trains his big staff in the art of merchandising—of which he is a master.

Al sat in his swing-back chair behind a vast desk in his office the other day reminiscing of the early days when he and Sarazen joined in a partnership that eventually made the pair among the most successful in the game.

It was while at Beardsley Park just before he went off to join the navy during World War I that Ciuci became interested in Sarazen, then a carpenter's helper and working for his dad in Bridgeport. Gene had been caddying at Apawamis in Rye, near the state border, and had acquired a working knowledge of the game. He had no clubs, or equipment, so asked Ciuci one day if he could loan him some sticks to play at Beardsley Park.

"Gene was a likeable sort of a kid and his swing was 'out of this world,'" recollected Al in discussing his early association with Gene. "I told him the course was his any time he wanted to play and he could even use my clubs. He got so good that I played with him many times. I went off to the war and Gene went over to Brooklawn to act as an assistant to Pro George Sparling."

Sarazen shifted from Brooklawn to Ft. Wayne, Ind., where he helped Ramsey Hunter, brother of Wille, then took over a nine-hole links at Titusville, Pa., before taking his first 18-hole pro assignment at the Highland club near Pittsburgh.

After Gene won the national open at Skokie CC in 1922 with a 288 to nose out

Bobby Jones and John L. Black, he was offered the pro job at fabulous Briarcliff. It was at this time that Sarazen introduced the affable Ciuci to the big time.

Al and Gene Team-up

"I intend to do a lot of traveling and you can look after the shop and take care of the lessons at Briarcliff," suggested Sarazen to Al, who visualized a bright career as a partner of the boy to whom he gave a chance to play at Bridgeport a few years earlier. Actually, Al confided, Gene gave him the offer the day he was playing Walter Hagen a match at the Westchester Biltmore in Rye. "He was going over to play in the British open and he wouldn't take no for an answer," Ciuci said recalling the formation of the partnership.

Sarazen and Ciuci stayed at Briarcliff for two years and moved together when offered the pro shop at Fresh Meadow CC, then located in Flushing. Sarazen left Al at the Flushing club to take over Macdonald Smith's post at old Lakeville CC in Great Neck, the present Fresh Meadow layout, rated one of the finest in the country.

It was natural for Al Ciuci to turn to merchandising with Sarazen and his younger brother, Henry, who came close to the top in several national opens, to do the playing and a lot of teaching. As a result, Al Ciuci today is looked upon by equipment salesmen as one of the most astute and successful dealers in the country.

Actually, the pro shop at Fresh Meadow, which occupies an independent wing of the sprawling clubhouse, surrounded with rhododendrons and azaleas, is a miniature golf department store.

"It's a far cry from the days of 1917 when the average pro shop consisted of a few clubs made by the professional, a few balls and some old furniture picked up at some second-hand place," suggested Ciuci as he gazed over the spacious, streamlined pro shop that is the pride and joy of himself and all of the near 550 members of Fresh Meadow.

"I guess I was fortunate in getting my start in the days when pros were considered pioneers and was able to go

through the evolutionary stages of the game. When I started we bought heads for the hickory shafts and spent the dull winters assembling the clubs for the following spring. There was no machinery for club polishing in those days and we had to use sandpaper to keep the clubs clean of the inevitable rust. The introduction of steel shafted clubs from manufacturers revolutionized the business."

Treat Them All Fine

Ciuci feels that impartial treatment of members is the key to success in professional golf—or any business. The fellow who rarely buys in the pro shop gets the same consideration and treatment from Ciuci or any of his assistants when he steps into the shop.

"And the bigger the man is, the more he will appreciate the impartial treatment, for if he is the president of a company he will realize the importance of this system more so than the man who is not directing a big operation dealing with the public," opined Al. "In fact, the big shots look for less treatment from the pro, I have found. Officers, it seems, are the easiest to please, for they, through their work guiding committees, know of the difficulties encountered in trying to please the public."

There is no dull season at Fresh Meadow, what with a magnificent pool for the use of the members during warm weather, an 18-hole layout that sprawls over nearly 200 acres of picturesque, rolling land and ample hills for ski lovers during the winter.

That means that in addition to golf equipment, the Fresh Meadow pro shop is well stocked in the latest modes for bathing and skiing. There is nothing a golfer, swimmer or skier would desire that can't be readily produced by Al Ciuci. As a result, Ciuci probably does a bigger volume of business than any private club pro in the country.

The Ciuci pro shop is the equal of any Fifth Avenue store, with fluorescent lighting effects, streamlined show cases, attractive flooring and gaily painted walls featuring blow-up photos of golfing scenes through the years.

Puts on "Sales"

Ciuci employs the techniques employed by the smarter department store executives. He puts on periodic sales to move his merchandise and avoid excess inventories. Everybody likes a bargain once in a while, so why not give the members a break when one gets overstocked. The big stores do it successfully, why not the pro? contends Al.

Al has always adopted a policy of having ample stock for the members to choose from and avoid stocking items, especially expensive ones, that don't move too freely. Members of top clubs, especially, look for superior merchandise and Ciuci has never diverted from a policy of producing nothing but the best.

A suggestion that Ciuci has for fellow professionals is to make frequent changes

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Al Ciuci has large pro shop at Fresh Meadow CC where frequent changes in display of large stock of merchandise helps to keep buying interest up and sales moving. Al (L) looks over golf shoe as brother Floyd looks on. Another brother, Henry, helps golfer, Lester Rice, in selection of new club.

with the emphasis on nitrogen, was applied every 30 days.

"In a hot, dry winter which was ruinous to ryegrass, Highland bent thrived, and lasted well into the summer. Some is present in the greens now. Although no additional Bermuda was planted, a thick turf was formed, completely covering each green, by early summer, largely because of the regular spiking plus the ample nitrogen nutrition. Greens mowing has been at 15/64 inch all summer.

"The fairways, originally with about 50 percent weed cover, were double treated with the Fairway-Green Aerifier, and then treated with a mixture of 2, 4-D, PMAS, and minor elements. As the weeds died, the soil aeration plus the topdressing provided by the Aerifier, plus the fertilizer supplied by disintegrating weeds allowed the Bermuda to form a tight, luxuriant turf. We now have the most luxuriant fairways in Florida. No regular fertilizer has been added.

"About the time we had achieved the best playing conditions in Florida, all our club funds were burglarized. The manager then quit. We discovered debts of which we had been unaware. All directors except one agreed that the club must fold at once.

"Thus it became necessary for me to jump actively into clubhouse affairs to save my beautiful research set-up.

"Sixteen ladies agreed to serve in pairs, daily, to operate the clubhouse. All money found its way into the cash register, and the ladies turned in from \$200 to \$250 weekly, net profit, to the club treasury for the first four weeks. This without any supplies in the pro-shop except golf balls.

"In the meantime, I whipped up interest by an anonymous golf column in our weekly town paper.

"Finally, when favorable community interest was generated by the determined and successful activities of the club ladies; the pulchritudinous and persistent women were induced to canvass the community systematically for desirable members. This activity continues to swell the revitalized treasury.

"But the ladies are tiring of the monotony and routine of daily service at the club, and the need of an inspired pro-manager is becoming urgent."

SUPTS. REPORT HEAVY WORK

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treatment of driveways in winter; Fall treatment of all greens and tees; trimming and pruning of trees; collection of leaves. Brinkworth is buying a welding unit to

equip the Minikahda shop for repair and construction work.

South Plans Big Program

Usual fall work of sowing rye plus other seasonal routine in the south is to be increased by more fertilizing than has been done in previous years in the south. Availability of pipe, tile and labor has crystallized plans of southern clubs for putting irrigation and drainage systems into good modern condition.

Influence of the southeastern and Texas and Oklahoma turf conferences and University of California at Los Angeles turf experimental work is a big factor in fall programs in the south. Course alteration and new construction is scheduled about at a normal rate since the war's end. Southern turf standards generally have raised to a marked degree in recent years.

It's still anybody's guess what play this winter will be at southern resort courses but already it's certain that the resort courses will not hold back on any expense within reason for getting each layout in condition to make a competitive bid for whatever play does come south next winter.

Expensive need of modern machinery and additional quantities of materials and supplies has been spotlighted by this season's unusually heavy demands on the greenkeepers' crews and equipment, the constant drain on operating supplies and the lengthy schedule of new and improvement work for fall attention.

As was expected, when clubs found themselves in fine cash positions after the war ended and general business continued good, there was considerable rehabilitation of clubhouses and new clubhouse building. Course maintenance equipment primary needs of equipment and supplies were cared for but no club went wild on those expenditures.

Now bar and restaurant business has tightened up at many clubs while play is heavier than ever before. The spotlight has shifted to spending wisely on the course to keep the members or pay-as-you-play customers coming. The fall course work schedules and purchasing programs impressively reveal that club officials are aware that the better the condition of the course, the better the whole establishment's chances of safely riding the hollow of the business wave.

CIUCI, PRO SELLING STAR

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in the arrangement of articles, especially those on counters in the middle of the shop. Never permit your shop to get monotonous and look for eye appeal at

all times, is the Ciuci credo. "Once in a while offer a 'special' and you will see sales pick up," says Ciuci. Give your assistants a chance to decorate the shop and you are bound to get new and maybe fresher ideas.

At Fresh Meadow, with Al's shop off the beaten path, he has installed beautiful showcases between the locker-room and showers. These are lighted indirectly and each week are changed to add new interest.

Al maintains that inasmuch as the pro shop has evolved into a first class store, pros and their assistants might improve their position by studying or possibly taking off-season jobs at department stores. The experience gained would prove invaluable, he contends, as one can't learn too much about the merchandising end of the game.

In the opinion of Al, who has been president of the LPGA for the past 15 years, professionals have done more than any single group to advance the game, but at the same time have done surprisingly little to advance themselves.

Don't Muff Merchandising

"My arrangement, during the early years with Sarazen, was ideal for me, but Gene went out to make himself internationally famous and gave me a chance to build up a reputation for both of us in the pro shop, but the average pro, in his desire to achieve fame through tournament play, muffs a chance to become a merchandiser and secure the proper compensation for his ability," reasoned the 52-year-old Ciuci who looks like a fellow in the early forties.

"The average pro, too, in his effort to impress the members with his ability to crack par and become a howling success in the pro world, gives himself a financial beating inasmuch as his first obligation to himself is to be a businessman. Some of the pros adopt a persecution complex, an attitude that corrects nothing and leads the pro down the road to obscurity.

"Of course, the average golf pro should engage in tournaments, but like other lines, there should be a happy medium achieved, so that he won't neglect his shop.

"Pros must realize that stores, even the neighborhood variety, are competition, especially in areas like Fresh Meadow where so many of the members have charge accounts at the better department stores. This kind of competition poses a terrific problem for the pro and if he is not aggressive and fails to apply sound business methods he will soon find his cash register getting rusty from lack of exercise.

"Actually, the golf pro is a style setter for the members. As a result, the members follow his suggestions when it comes to purchasing golfing and sports attire. Johnny Farrell, who came up with Sarazen, was the man who made golfers conscious of the fine taste of the pro when it came to dressing for golf and informal parties.

"And, don't forget the fairer sex. They do a large portion of the buying at Fresh Meadow principally because of the fact that I have always tried to maintain a stylish and attractive display of articles they desire. One must be careful in ordering women's items inasmuch as the styles change from year to year and it is not profitable to be caught with outmoded items in the feminine line.

"A good habit for the average pro to form is listen attentively to salesmen when they drop around to peddle their articles. They know the answers to all the questions, both good and bad, and it is worth while knowing of the merits and demerits of an item so that one can converse intelligently with the members and other patrons. Members, who are certainly above the average in intelligence, will soon learn whether you know what you are talking about in discussing the merits of an article for sale."

Apparel Advisory Service

Ciuci points out that he instructs his shop staff headed by his brother, Floyd, whom he brought down from Mill River four years ago when Fresh Meadow shifted from Flushing to Great Neck, in the art of advising clients as to the proper type of clothes to be worn. The men in Al's shop must know what to recommend for the good of the member, taking into consideration comfort, freedom in action and other features.

That goes for shoes, hose and trousers, along with shirts, sweaters and headgear. The seller, in Al's opinion, should know how to advise a prospective buyer the proper type of hose to be worn, just the same as knowing the proper type of shoe and trousers. He must know the weight differences, thickness of the soles in the case of shoes, the number of spikes required and the proper position for the spikes.

Ciuci feels that as golf clubs are divided into several classifications, with the municipally-operated, the privately-operated public links and the private club, the pro merchandising requirements, of course, vary as to quality, quantity and price.

Having started at a municipal course, Ciuci knows most of the answers in all classes of golf markets. Al feels that an aggressive pro, knowing full well that

