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Golf Business Sound but Must Heed Danger Signs

By **JOE GRAFFIS**

Very little complaining has marked the public course general increase in fees. That's undoubtedly the highest tribute that could be paid to park commissioners and supts., course supts. and pros collaborating in public golf operation. Caught between political pressure and the public's strong demand for public course facilities closely approximating private course standards the public course men have handled a delicate job exceptionally well.

What makes the public course operating problem unusually tough is that in many cases the public courses are the only municipal recreation operations that are virtually self-supporting from playing fee income and often produce profits that finance construction of additional public courses as required and offset the deficits of other park recreation facility operation.

Course supts. at parks have the extremely difficult task of maintaining good playing facilities despite heavy play by men and women golfers who need a great deal more education in their responsibilities in how they're expected to treat the course. The National Golf Foundation has scheduled for release early this year printed matter on player's responsibility for course condition for general distribution to public course players.

Juniors Do Public Relations Job

An important factor in minimizing complaints against public course fee increases has been many pros' activity in junior golf at the courses in high-school tie-ups. The kids have been made public relations missionaries for the park board and public golf by pro work in making the youngsters golf enthusiasts.

Reduced fees at restricted hours when play of junior golfers can be accommodated, and group lessons, have been strong elements of the public relations job done by park golf executive and operating officials. The pros' class lessons for beginner adults also have figured prominently

in selling the public on public golf management.

The semi-public courses have had no alternative to a rate increase. They've had to raise rates or go broke. In most cases rates have been raised enough to permit some attractive course alterations or improvement in playing conditions which have more than nullified the possible drop of patronage because of higher fees.

Adjust to Loss of Slots

In numerous semi-public and private club cases the loss of slot machine revenue has been serious. Perhaps on a basis of ethics the best thing that could be said about a slot machine was that it didn't take a .45 off its hip and walk out and stick up a victim. But, on the practical basis of humans being human the slot machines did get revenue painlessly from many who otherwise wouldn't spend. What knocked the slot machines out was the politicians' inability to control the mobsters who commanded the racket phase of the machines. In view of the RFC, Internal Revenue dept., and Dept. of Justice corruption it's somewhat surprising the government would bear down on any racketeers.

However, the fact remains that loss of slot machine revenue has necessitated considerable readjustment of financial and operating practices at a number of clubs. More attractive programs of clubhouse, golf and other entertainment are necessary.

Dues Increases Studied

Increased dues are inevitable at many clubs, although as John P. Garrow, chmn., Club Management Committee of the Chicago District Golf Assn., pointed out in the committee's annual report a study of what the traffic will bear makes it obvious that increased dues and annual assessments are not the complete answer to the problem of private club deficits.

Garrow's committee, in its analysis of Chicago district clubs which cooperated in a survey of private club condition, found basis for estimating "that generally less than one-third of a club's membership adequately supports dining room and bar."

The Club Managers' Assn. of America at its 1951 national convention's country club round-table stressed livelier, more comprehensive entertainment programs to get more members and guests patronizing club affairs. The managers' program for their 1952 convention again will emphasize this detail of management and again will contend with the problem of getting club officials and committee heads to cooperate for more house revenue.

One difficulty the managers had in 1951 was reluctance of club boards to approve price increases on food, especially, to cover increased food, preparation and service costs. Managers have been getting gray-headed in a losing battle to maintain private club service standards.

Course Labor Costlier

Course supts. too are having acute troubles with labor shortage. They're facing another year of demands for high maintenance standards from players, and higher wages and less work from course workers. In one metropolitan district course workmen went on strike at a leading club because their pay was less than that of many of the caddies. Superintendents in another metropolitan district say they can't get competent labor when dishwashers in the clubhouse get paid more than course labor.

Those are typical operating problems club officials have to face with their department heads this year.

Taxation problems undoubtedly will be a headache of increasing intensity.

Golf's Appeal Stronger

On the bright side is a steadily increasing popularity of golf and increasing recognition of the physical and mental benefits of golf play, together with more appeal of the clubs for women's and juniors' play. The majority of metropolitan district clubs seem to have protected themselves against reaching a dangerously high average age of members by making inducements to get members among desirable younger businessmen.

Pro Percentage Slumps

The professionals have discovered that mounting operating costs have cut their net profit to a percentage that's too low for a seasonal business. Larger sales volume is the pros' main reliance in making the business attractive enough to draw and hold the sort of pro businessmen clubs need.

Development of Christmas business and apparel business has added volume that in

a lot of cases has kept the gross profit from flopping despite the sharp decrease in net profit per dollar of sales revenue. In some cases of smaller clubs where alert and energetic pro service is the hope for improving the over-all financial and operating picture, the limitations of pro income have the pros just about breaking even and looking for other jobs.

It is certain that club cleaning, storage and minor repair monthly charges will be increased at many clubs this year. Pros to get satisfactory assistants and even club-cleaning boys often have to pay wages about equal to what the pro himself is paid by the club. Examination of all charges involved in club-cleaning, storage and minor repairs and conditioning, plus the added complications of bag cart service, have revealed that the monthly club service charges may cost the pro money the member is supposed to pay.

However painful the discovery may be to the professional, the true net figures on club service only are a minor item among other operations that should be fully examined and corrected by golf club officials and department heads before another season gets under full swing.

The golf situation, by and large, is in sound financial shape and certainly is in excellent condition as far as number of players is concerned. But financial and operating danger signals that appeared last year call for clear recognition and immediate action.

WEISS HAILED BY LEHIGH



Paul Weiss (left) honored by Pres. Harold Mumma (right), members of Lehigh CC, Allentown, Pa., and section's supts., for 25 years of Paul's cheerful, able service to the club. Clifford Kolock and Raymond Behney, also 25 year vets at Lehigh were feted. Weiss came to the club with Toomey and Flynn when Lehigh was being built. He stayed on and developed Lehigh into one of the country's best conditioned courses. He's got detailed course operating expenses since 1926 in his files.