

Can Course Operating Costs Be Compared

By a GOLF COURSE EQUIPMENT and SUPPLY SALESMAN

A FRIEND of mine who is serving his first year as a green chairman went to considerable trouble to collect reports that several district golf associations have compiled on course maintenance costs. He also was able to get course maintenance financial statements from 11 clubs that had not sent figures to associations.

He said to me "You've been selling to golf courses for some years so maybe you will be able to tell me what these figures mean. I can take a company's financial statement and see what the picture is but I am more confused about golf course business after trying to study these figures than I ever was before. Are other chairmen and club officials as puzzled as I am?"

"I hope so," I told him. "If they are they are better off than they'd be in thinking they have the right answers. The unfortunate feature of these reports is that often the lowest figures set the standard and nothing else counts. But the compilations are hopeful beginnings. Chairmen and course superintendents instead of either considering them as gospel or as dangerously misleading arrays of figures, will have to continue thinking about some uniform and sound methods that will provide helpful guidance."

In my opinion there have been only two practical approaches to comparison of golf course operating costs. One was the study Prof. Dickinson and some of his experienced students at Amherst made of costs collected years ago. They determined percentages of various items of operating costs. While this was not an answer that allowed comparison on a results basis it did show a percentage range that provided some guidance.

Midwest Assn. Examines Costs

The other approach was the survey made by the Midwest Golf Course Superintendents' Assn. In areas involved, maintenance details, and costs, it was far ahead of anything else that has been done. Naturally it would be. The superintendents know the work on their own and other courses, the labor conditions,

and the results and surely are as deeply interested in getting results for each dollar spent as any official of their clubs.

Yet the Midwest approach to this problem of efficient course operation and improvement of playing conditions has not received the vigorous cooperation from club officials which it warrants if golf courses are to be operated in a business-like way.

Why? I don't know. The survey was made in collaboration with capable and conscientious officials of the Chicago District Golf Assn. but even their help has been inadequate to make substantial progress toward uniform, intelligible and helpful comparisons of course costs.

Eventually the Midwest approach may become the standard pattern for showing how golf courses can be maintained in good condition and without wasting money but that time, I am afraid, is a long way ahead. In the meanwhile most comparisons of course costs may do more harm than good, and particularly at a period when the salary and wage conditions in golf course management and labor often are bad for anything that pretends to be a business.

In several reports the puzzled chairman showed me there were totals of golf course operating expense much higher than figures for other clubs in those areas and I could see the chairmen and superintendents of those clubs were going to be severely criticized by their boards. On further investigation I learned that the customary mistake had been made. Complete costs of all outside operations were charged to course maintenance, hence the total figures were seriously misleading and probably involve the risk of cheap operation and deterioration in the condition of the course.

The peculiar thing about many of these approaches to comparisons of course operating costs is that they are about like comparing the cost of a bushel of potatoes with that of a bushel of diamonds, then wanting to convert diamonds into potatoes so the figures will stand up.

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Golf Goods Almost 40 Per Cent 1952 Sports Sales

Athletic Goods Manufacturers' Assn. figures on 1952 sales of athletic and sporting goods sales, audited by Ernst and Ernst, show golf equipment at \$39,511,870 in factory selling price, including excise tax. Total for the manufacturers who include all leading makers and by far the bulk of sports goods production, except hunting and fishing equipment, is \$100,297,177.

Baseball and softball comes next to golf, with \$20,494,320. In third place is inflated goods (footballs, basketballs, etc.) with \$11,216,394. Then follow, in order: athletic shoes, miscellaneous items, athletic clothing, tennis equipment, helmets, pads, etc., and boxing gloves.

In 1952 there were 3,374,886 golf clubs sold, of which 2,319,512 were irons and 1,055,374 woods. Ball sales by factories were 2,113,629 doz. Bag sales were 491,697. In the ball department the highest grade balls accounted for almost 60 per cent of the entire volume. Highest grade irons accounted for almost 40 per cent of total iron sales. Top grade goods were

about 31 per cent of all wood sales. The second highest price class in woods accounted for a little more than 34 per cent of the wood volume.

Course Operating Costs

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What makes the situation especially unreasonable is that every golfer realizes the great difference in courses. An 80 on one course would be far better scoring than a 68 on another course, yet the operating costs are compared on the same level. The course rating system has been extensively adopted as groundwork for fair handicapping but there's no consideration given to course rating in comparison of maintenance accounting, save in the Midwest Golf Course Supts.' survey and, as I've said, that is a long way from having received merited acceptance.

So my friend, the new chairman, can't get the help he wants from today's comparisons of course operating costs and by the time he gets a fairly clear idea of how these comparisons could be made he will be tired of his job as chairman and let his successor take up the search.

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