

Says 9-Hole Owner Must Run Concessions, Pro Shop to Operate at a Profit

Successful operation of a 9-hole, semi-private club can't be merely an April through September proposition even if it is located in such a far northerly clime as Ottawa, Ill., according to Mike Sipula, pro-owner of Pine Hills GC in that city.

Besides keeping the course in shape for play at least 10 months of the year and making clubhouse facilities available the year around, Sipula points out that there are many other demands the pro-owner must face up to if he is to continue operating profitably.

For one thing he must become resigned to working a 14-15 hour day during the busy season and then taper off to about 8 or 10 hours when the lull sets in. It doesn't hurt if he is something of an electrician, plumber, painter and has been checked out on perhaps two or three other trades; has a family large and interested enough to help him run the business; and finally, and probably most important, runs the various club concessions himself in addition to operating the pro shop.

This latter point, in Mike's estimation, means the difference between victory and defeat in his business.

Mike Sipula is a fine example of the ruggedly individualistic small businessman who is putting himself out far more than the average fellow in order to make a living. A combination of love of work and the profit motive keeps him rooted in Ottawa. A man in Mike's position has a large degree of independence but he is the first to concede that his is pretty near a 24-hour, 365 day working year. Although there are more than 1,150 semi-private courses in the U. S. similar to Pine Hills, it's safe to say that there are no more than a few hundred Mike Sipulas.

35 Years Here

Sipula's life has been centered around Pine Hills for the last 35 years. He caddied there as a kid, became assistant professional when he was 17 and in 1941, in partnership with two other men, bought the property. After the war it was decided that three partners couldn't make livings out of the course and so Mike borrowed money and bought the interests of the other two.

Pine Hills' main clubhouse is located atop a bluff and, for the most part, is rented out only for social affairs. A second and smaller clubhouse, at a lower level, was expanded from the original pro shop and

now has a kitchen, dining area and locker room. It's the hub around which most activity revolves. As handy with a hammer and saw as he is with a 7-iron, Sipula handled most of the construction work himself in enlarging what he refers to as the No. 2 clubhouse. More additions will be built here in the next two or three years.

Mike's wife, Ellawyn, a comely and extremely energetic person, runs the food and beverage concessions at both clubhouses and has had enough acumen to have turned a substantial profit from these enterprises year in and year out. When the large clubhouse is rented for social events, Mrs. Sipula recruits women in the Pine Hills neighborhood to assist with the catering and thus is able to get along with very little permanent help.

Another invaluable employee at Pine Hills is Mike Sipula, II, a 16-year-old high school lad who does a good job of filling in for his father or mother when the need arises. Young Mike not only handles customers well in the pro shop but is a competent fry cook. He also hits a long ball and plays Pine Hills in close to par. Besides Mike II there are three other boys in the Sipula household who will be moving up to get their Pine Hills business education in a few years.

Family Big Help

Discussing the economics of his business, the elder Sipula points out that it takes family cooperation to make a business such as his pay. Nearly 15,000 rounds are played at Pine Hills in a year's time but revenue derived from daily fees and season tickets is almost completely absorbed in upkeep and payroll expenses. As it is, there are six regular outside employees, three of whom are year-around maintenance men, at the Ottawa course. When their paychecks are deducted from the gross it becomes evident that the pro-owner has to look for all possible ways and means of salvaging some profits for himself. The family's willingness to pitch in and work helps him to do this.

Sipula does a much better than average volume of business at his pro shop, especially for a 9-hole course. His inventory at the beginning of the season is in the neighborhood of \$13,000 and, as several manufacturers' reps will tell you, a lot of merchandise is sold at Pine Hills. Sipula says it has taken at least 10 years of steady plugging to develop the kind of goodwill that brings the golfer to his shop to buy without first shopping around for the equipment he's interested in.

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Sipula can offer liberal allowances on clubs that are traded in because he has developed several sources that take used clubs off his hands. This, and the fact that the Ottawa pro always has carried such a large inventory that he can supply the customer from stock without having to go through the ordeal of sending a special order to the manufacturer, are, Mike feels, the secrets of his success as a merchandiser. Sipula is particularly adverse to having golfers wait for from three to four days to as long as two weeks to get items that have to be ordered. "Too many sales go out the window when that happens," he says.

Near Year-Around Play

As for the length of the season at Pine Hills, there is no set pattern as to when it begins or ends. Ottawa is only a few miles south of Chicago but it isn't uncommon for tournaments and golf outings to be staged there anytime from November through February. A Jan. 1 tournament is an established event, for example. There are perhaps 20 or 30 good golfing days during the winter months, even at this northerly latitude, and Sipula usually has everything in readiness for the surprisingly large number of golfers who want to play

at this time. Keeping the course available practically around the calendar has, in Mike's estimation, done a lot in bringing Pine Hills a large following during what is generally accepted as the regular season.

If you have any illusions about the pro-owner operation of a 9-hole course being a nice, comfortable affair where a fellow makes money while working out in the open, Mike Sipula probably will dispel them. But at the same time he'll point out that a fellow could do a lot worse in spite of the responsibilities and long hours. That's what has kept him at Pine Hills all these years.

NOER: 1957 Roundup

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The rate for lead arsenate should be in the range of 5 to 7 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft. spring and fall. The seeding rate need not exceed 1 lb. of bentgrass seed per 1,000 sq. ft. at any time. Cross aerifying followed by thorough spiking is advisable before seeding. Enough nitrogen should be used to maintain a vigorous growth without causing grass to be tender and lush.

Clamor for a complete water system in places of severe drought is understandable. Frequently important details about the de-