

Fore & Aft Operation Saves Time on Range

Shortly before his fatal illness in February, Pete Thomas gave the information for this article to GOLFDOM as part of an interview in which he reviewed some of the more successful features of golf range operation.

By combining mowing and ball picking operations, Pete Thomas, owner of a range near Hillside, Ill., estimates that he saves more than 200 man hours of work during a season and at least twice that amount in wages. The operation, which Thomas conceived early last season, is handled simply enough. Pete hitches a three-unit picker to the front of his tractor and a five gang mower to the rear by slightly throttling down the speed of the machine, accomplishes both picking and mowing jobs in a minimum of time.

Since he mows twice a week and it takes a little over three hours to cover his 18-acre range, Thomas, who operates about 30 weeks a year, figures he annually saves at least 200 hours. The secret of the dual accomplishment, says the Riverside man, is dense turf.

"We've done a little testing on areas where turf is thin or practically non-existent," says Thomas, "and results were poor. But in places where the turf is dense enough to kind of tee up the balls both picker and mower work perfectly. We occasionally cut up a few balls by striking them with mower blades as we make turns, but in view of the money we save in combining operations we can well afford the loss."

Another big advantage in handling the picking and mowing jobs simultaneously, Thomas points out, is that play doesn't have to be suspended as invariably is the case when a range is being mowed. Pete never has tried to figure out how much revenue may be lost due to interruption of play during mowing, but if there is much activity at a range in the morning when this job ordinarily is handled, it could amount to a fairly sizeable amount.

When Thomas took over the range, which he leases from the adjoining Fresh Meadow GC, in 1954, he was confronted with 18 acres of weeds and grassless plots. Since that time he has planted 2,000 lbs. of grass seed, used about 35 tons of fertilizer and a small lakefull of herbicide to give his acreage that green, vel-

vety look that a course supt. loves to show to a green chmn. Pete, a veteran of 30-odd years in the golf business, is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts winter school and an expert turf man.

There are a few other features about the operation of the Pete Thomas range that others in the business would do well to copy. He has 400 ft. of automatic tees and another 400 ft. for teeing off the turf. In the latter area, he encourages the sluggers to move around quite freely so as not to confine their damage to one small strip of turf. He does a solid business in the sale of new and used clubs though rather wide newspaper advertising and by encouraging players to test clubs in differ-



Picker ahead, mower behind double up operations

ent lengths and flexes so they can determine what clubs fit their swings. A sign in his shop, prominently displayed behind the cash register, encourages this testing and apparently sells quite a few golf sticks for Pete. At any rate, he expanded his sales room last fall.

Thomas has an inventory of 20,000 balls in continuous circulation. Balls are graded every day because he is well convinced that if his patrons find too many clunkers in their baskets it won't be long before they are doing their practice swings at ranges other than his. Every ball that is picked goes through the washer, but whenever possible, Thomas holds off harvesting them until late at night when the dew is on the ground and Nature provides a free wash job.

Finch Lewis, Thomas' pro instructor, is kept busy at least 12 or 14 hours a day during the busy season giving lessons. There has been steady improvement in this end of the business over the years. Part of this may be because under a sign telling golfers that Lewis, a PGA member, is the range pro, is a second sign. It reads: "Go Ahead and Do It Yourself. Louse It up Good!" Eventually, many a person who has loused it up catches the hint and comes to Lewis to be de-loused.