



## Don't Make Your Shop Too Commercial!

Pro Gene O'Brien (in photo) helped organize Rolling Hills, has been there for about 12 years.

*The fixtures, displays and decor of your shop may be stunning, but if you lose the homey touch, players may be scared away*

### BY GENE O'BRIEN

Professional, Rolling Hills CC, Wichita, Kans.

I often wonder if we aren't making our pro shops a little too functional (a nice word for commercial) and as a result are sacrificing the comfortable atmosphere that distinguished them some 20 years ago. My new shop is about a year old. When it was being built there was a temptation to accede to the suggestion of a few well meaning persons and make it nothing

Fixtures, displays at Rolling Hills emphasize self-service. This photo was taken from lounge area (which O'Brien feels is being neglected in many shops.)





more than a combination men's and women's wear store with sportswear, accessories and playing equipment practically bulging through the walls.

But a good deal of reflection restrained me from doing this. I helped organize Rolling Hills in 1947-48, converting it from a public course originally known as Westlink. In the 11 years I had served the Rolling Hills members I had built my reputation as a teaching pro and not as a merchandising expert. I decided that if I made my shop an out and out commercial affair, and not one with a little warmth, my lesson business, along with sales of sportswear and equipment, would decline. So, I insisted on a lounge area in the front part of the shop. It is fronted by a 3 x 8-ft. picture window, has six easy chairs and a couple book racks and gives a magnificent view from which the golfer can see nearly 50 per cent of the course.

#### Wants to Retain Warmth

Don't get the impression that I am being unrealistic about the merchandising end of my business. I have as many motives in the back of my head as the next professional. I am as much on the lookout for the dollar bill as anyone running a business. But I want to be at least subtle in trying to get it. I don't think we should make our pro shops dry goods stores or little  
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With more than 500 golfers at his club, the majority of them serious players, O'Brien has to keep a large stock of equipment on hand. Lesson business still is his bread and butter income producer but sportswear (below) is continually paying larger dividends.



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supermarkets and push people out the door after we have sold them. That is why I want to restore or retain a little warmth in our shops, make them, if necessary, the last refuge for the golfer. In doing this, I think all of us will profit and prosper in spite of what some so-called merchandising experts recommend.

As I have said, I have built my business through the lesson tee in contrast to some pros who have concentrated on the selling side. One system is no better than the other because both have worked equally well in our field. I have gravitated to teaching because, I guess, I am more interested in my players' games than in their appearances. One of my assistants, Dave Truffelli, seems to have the same inclination, while the other, Duane Lietzke is more of an all-around man. He teaches, helps out in the shop and supervises caddies.

### Wife Is "Inside" Brain

One reason why I never developed into a better than average retailer is that my wife, Marie, is the "inside" brain at our place. She keeps the books, handles about 95 per cent of women's sales and at least 50 per cent of sales to our men players. She has freed me, as I tell her, for greater things — but neither of us takes this remark too seriously.

The fact that we have 300 male and 200 women persons, many of them avid students of the game, playing golf at Rolling Hills accounts for the fact that I have devoted most of my time in the last decade to instruction. It isn't hardly necessary for us to promote lesson business any more because both Dave Truffelli and myself are kept sufficiently busy on the teaching tee. Many of our players come to us for regular checkups just as they go to their doctors. About the only form of lesson advertising we use are two or three signs listing rates that are posted in the shop.

My greatest accomplishment in teaching has been to get nearly all of the 200 women, who play at our course, started in golf. For the last 12 seasons I have conducted free spring classes for them and during the same time I have run free clinics throughout the season for Junior players. Other than this, all lessons at Rolling Hills are paid for. That doesn't mean, though, that both my assistants and



Twenty-year old Pat Nightingale of Detroit was queen of the 3rd International Miniature tournament played on the boardwalk at Asbury Park, N. J., Sept. 10-11. She is seen walking under an arch of putters formed by 36 finalists. Cecil Newman, air conditioning engineer of West Palm Beach, Fla., defeated Tom Tripp, 16-year old Lansing, Mich., schoolboy, 80-81, in the 36-hole final.

myself won't take a few minutes to correct a flaw in a player's grip or stance or swing whenever we spot it.

### Goodwill Is Indirect Saleswork

I haven't made a point of trying to do too much selling on the lesson tee. I rather feel that people resent this, particularly if you appear overanxious to make a sale. There is no doubt that you can drop hints or suggestions, but normally it shouldn't go beyond this. Lesson time is a time for creating goodwill, just as that lounge space in the pro shop should be intended for the same purpose. Creating goodwill is selling by indirection. Perhaps more pros should concentrate on it.

All the fixtures and displays in our shop are the most modern type and all lend themselves to self-service selling. I try to put as many items as possible on hangers because I feel that to sell shirts, blouses, sweaters, shorts, slacks, etc., that is what you have to do. Volume sales of these items has increased 80 or 90 per cent since I started displaying them this way. We operate throughout the year and manage to turn over our stock about twice during the 12-month period. Due to the year-around operation, and because we constantly transfer slow moving merchandise to locations where shop traffic is heaviest, it isn't necessary for us to un-

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load a very large percentage of merchandise at sale prices.

## Weekly Newsletter

Like most pros at private clubs, I haven't found it necessary to do much advertising. However, since 1950, I have sent a weekly newsletter to my more than 500 players describing any new merchandise received as well as reminding them of the old.

As I have mentioned, my wife handles the shop bookkeeping. She makes up a weekly, monthly and annual profit and loss statement and we consult all of these frequently to see where we stand in relation to past periods and years. In addition, we keep a running inventory on fast moving items such as balls, gloves, etc., and a monthly inventory on all other articles. We also handle our billing, something I would like to relinquish to the club because I feel that accounts are paid more quickly that way.

## Shop Air Conditioned

We have, in the estimation of many people in the golf business, one of the finest shops in the central states area. The floor is carpeted to match the shade of

the beamed ceiling, a kind of brownish green. Walls are panelled in hemlock and the fine effect of the panelling is not lost with the display fixtures attached, as you can tell by looking at the photos. The shop is completely air conditioned and in the wintertime we get heat from a central system, using the same ducts that bring in the cool air in the summer. As I pointed out before, the whole theme of our operation is to create a comfortable atmosphere for the golfer and we try to be on the alert to enhance it wherever we can. It is this intangible factor that has enabled us to steadily pile up more sales and more profits year after year since we started at Rolling Hills in 1948.

One of the country's best known home pros, Gene O'Brien, has been in the golf business for nearly 30 years. He started out caddying in Hutchinson, Kans., and became a locker room attendant and later assistant pro at the old Carey Lake CC there. Then he was named pro at Carey Park GC, also in Hutchinson, serving at that course during 1941-42. In 1946 he came to Westlink, a Wichita public course, which was sold shortly thereafter and became, as he has noted, Rolling Hills.