

Tax-free public operation draws players from clubs that pay their way

Muny Competition Hurts If Golfers Aren't Plentiful

Thirty-year-old John Rocco, who came to play a 9-hole course in Hackettstown, N.J., some four or five years ago and stayed to buy it, takes objection to a statement made by Geoffrey Cornish in an article that appeared in March (1965) *Golfdom*.

In the statement, which appeared on page 33, Cornish pointed out that fears of semi-private club owners who are put in the position of competing with municipal courses are not completely justified. He went on to say that generally there are enough golfers to go around and the semi-private club does not necessarily suffer because there is a publicly owned layout within perhaps a few miles of it.

Rocco not only objects to this view, but objects quite violently. His club, known as Musconetcony CC, is located in northwest New Jersey in a sparsely populated area and in 1964 lost money because many of its players were drawn off by a county course, opened in nearby Flanders.

"There were already five semi-private clubs in the Hackettstown-Flanders area," says Rocco, "when the decision was made to build the course at Flanders. All of the privately owned operations could have made money if the sixth club, not burdened with taxes, hadn't been opened. As it was, two of us lost money and the other three courses barely made enough to meet expenses.

Can They Hold Out?

"Eventually," Rocco continues, "our section of New Jersey will probably get strong resort play from New York City. A new superhighway is being built through the upper part of the state. Budd Lake, east of Hackettstown, has fine recreation possibilities. In from three to five years we may be living in one of the most thriving parts of the state, but the ques-



Ben Toski (l) and Bob Crissy ran the pro operation at Musconetcony in 1964.

tion is: Can I and the other four course owners hold out until all this potential business comes our way?"

John Rocco goes on to emphasize the great inconsistencies that arise when a municipally owned or county owned course is jammed into a locality that already has enough golf facilities. Within a few years after any course, backed by private financing, is built, its taxes invariably are doubled or tripled. In the case of Musconetcony the tax bill since 1961 has been increased from \$12,000 to \$42,000. In the meantime, land that is used for construction of a publicly owned course is taken off the tax rolls.

Then Revenue Is Reduced

A private owner may be able to stand the tax increase, but when a public course is opened in his neighborhood, it immediately starts to take players away from him. This is particularly true in an area where the golf playing population is relatively stable. In the case of the five courses in the Hackettstown-Flanders area, it isn't inaccurate to say that each lost as many as 15 or 20 per cent of its golfers when the county operated course was put in play. The upshot is that the private enter-

priser is forced to pour more money into the coffers of a governmental unit that already has reduced his income by establishing a business that takes customers and revenue away from him.

"I suppose it is the old story of government vs. private ownership," says Rocco. "If you don't run into it on the federal or state level, the county or local government manages to trap you."

Expanded Too Soon

When Rocco learned that the Flanders course was going to be opened in 1964, he made plans to expand Musconetcony from nine to 18 holes. He felt that he would have to do this to compete with the publicly owned layout. Construction on the second nine, delayed because title to the 170 acres on which the entire course is located had to be clarified by the courts, was rushed after it got underway. The result was that the new nine was not quite ready when play was begun on it. This led to numerous complaints and a further drifting of players to either the public course in Flanders or to the other four semi-private layouts in the Hackettstown area.

"I guess," says Rocco, "I was going to show the county officials that private enterprise could beat the government at its own game, but the plan boomeranged. The new nine not only was damaged by being opened too soon, but I'm afraid I lost some of the old Musconetcony patrons. On top of this, my taxes probably will be increased in 1965. That's what happens when an individual has to compete with the government."

Has Big Plans

If taxes and competition don't knock the Hackettstown owner out of business before the Budd Lake area starts to build up and help arrives via the superhighway, he plans to build a lodge, 60-unit motel and swimming pool. The Musconetcony course is located in a beautiful, even primitive setting, and several of its uphill holes, plus two or three others with elevated tees and greens, are as interesting and picturesque as any to be seen in the East. In the last two years, Rocco has built a pro shop along with a large maintenance building.

The new nine, with fairways planted to Seaside and Astoria, and greens in Pennecross, was built under the direction of Leslie Carpenter, a onetime Hackettstown policeman. Carpenter originally started out to be a golfer, discovered that he was more interested in turf than balata, attended a course management school at Rutgers and then came back to Musconetcony to take over as supt.

Range Raiders Well Organized, Says Illinois Operator

As a followup to the Range Theft article that appeared in May Golfdom (page 58), Jack Murray, who owns and operates a range in Lansing, Ill., says that ball thefts can be minimized if the operator establishes close liaison with the local police department. His losses have been restricted to less than 100 balls a year for several years simply because Lansing police respond quickly when a theft is reported, or investigate thoroughly when the thieves aren't immediately apprehended. Murray emphasizes that complete cleanup of the range after quitting time is necessary to keep down ball pilferage.

Had a Master Plan

Night raiders probably will always be a problem for range owners. Many of them operate as part of a ring. Two years ago, Ohio police apprehended a group of ball thieves who proceeded on a master plan. They wore camouflaged suits and rubber boots and carried specially designed shag bags in making their forays. The group operated across Iowa, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio and carried maps and notes that pinpointed practically every range in the four states. One of the raiders was carrying a pistol when the police nabbed him. This group is still out of circulation, but there isn't much doubt that it has successors.

Raiders steal balls from one range with the intention of selling them to others. About the only way range ball thievery can be made unprofitable, according to Murray, is for owners and operators to refuse to buy balls from other than recognized salesmen.