



RANGE THEFTS

Operators never have found an effective way to keep them cut down even though the toll is heavy

By A. R. GREEN

A driving range operator who wrote to GOLFDOM, reported that his range suffered an approximate \$1,000 loss of balls due to theft in the first three months of 1965. From a survey of range operators from coast to coast to find out what solutions these persons have for this expensive and persistent problem, several interesting ideas for stopping theft at ranges were developed.

Outdoor ranges surveyed vary from 7 to 16 acres and the number of tees run from 12 to 100. The average range size is about 11 acres with 30 tees. Most of the ranges, even those in warmer climates, have a seasonal operation.

12,500 Ball Average

The stock of balls carried by outdoor ranges varies from 5,000 to 28,000 with an overall average of about 12,500. The ranges estimate that they lose from about 500 to 2,500 balls per season. About 25 per cent of the operators report losses varying from 50 to 67 per cent. One operator says that his losses vary from 10 to 25 per cent of his stock.

In reply to the question, "How do you

combat theft?" some of the operators said:

"Keep the good will of neighborhood kids. Keep the fence lines clean so that kids can't hide there." Along this same line, which suggests that in many instances it is idle neighborhood youngsters who often account for a good deal of the thefts, one New York state operator says, "I employ kids in the area and pay them to pick up the balls with the hope that they will be good enough to keep away from my property after I leave for home." Another operator says, "Picking up all the balls at night helps." Several operators use barbed wire atop their fences in order to keep them from being scaled. Removing temptation seems to be the key to keeping down loss where youngsters are involved.

Most owners and operators say that having only one entrance and one exit is a considerable help in combating theft of balls by patrons. An eastern range owner remarks: "I attribute 95 per cent of the thefts to the Saturday night and Sunday afternoon crowds when many one-timers are using the range." To counteract theft at his range, a Pennsylvania operator paints large red circles on all his golf balls.



Range operated in conjunction with Arlington Park race track, near Chicago, uses all possible measures to keep ball thefts at a minimum. For example, bags aren't permitted on tee line and cars have to be parked some distance from the range. Manager Lou Ruef reports that ranges around Chicago often are visited by a team of ball thieves, who systematically loot a range and then try to sell the balls to other operators. Night raiders are another menace. Ruef says if employees are vigilant, ball thefts can be kept to five per cent of stock.

A Midwest range operator has all his balls banded and imprinted with the range name and park. A St. Louis, Mo. pro-operator says that if a customer is suspected of stealing, a range employee politely asks "to examine his bag" if he has brought his own clubs.

Most range operators report that they retrieve their balls in a variety of ways. Almost all use ball pickers of one type or another. However, some report picking-up balls by hand at various times, quite often after play is finished for the night. The pickers often seem to have the most use when the range is open and balls are needed to supply incoming customers. One operator who does not have a picker said that he believes a good deal of theft by youngsters would be eliminated if he were to use a picker.

Other Than Ball Theft

The survey also checked on other types of theft, such as of clubs. One operator remarks that there is a problem with club theft when the clubs are new. Most operators point out that there seems to be very little of this. One operator stated that he has only lost six clubs by theft

since 1929. While many agreed with the West Coast operator who called such theft, "Negligible," a number of ranges take precautions to prevent such losses. Some operators paint the club shafts, while others engrave their clubs with a range mark. Obviously a club is harder to get away with than a golf ball.

A surprising fact gathered from the survey is that only about 14 per cent of the range operators use automatic ball dispensers. The indication from those who do is that they use about three per range. The remaining 86 per cent say that their balls are dispensed over the counter by employees.

It is obvious that ball thefts from outdoor ranges is a problem that isn't taken lightly. Having to replace anywhere from 10 to 67 per cent of balls stocked cuts into the margin of profit for the average operator. This is particularly so if the range has a relatively limited season. The solutions most commonly agreed upon are having good fencing (with the fence lines kept clean and barbed wire on top) using good equipment for quick ball pickup, clearly marking all balls used, and having one entrance and exit for control of traffic.