And to think it all started with $500!

1927-28 · GOLFDOM · 1966-67 · 40th ANNIVERSARY YEAR

The golf industry has come a long way since Julian Curtiss brought back that assortment of Scotch golf clubs.

By JOE GRAFFIS

Starting with an entry in the records years before GOLFDOM was launched I'd give credit to a foresighted young man named Julian Curtiss for laying the cornerstone of America's golf industry. It was in 1892 that he planted the seed by returning from Scotland to bewilder his A. G. Spalding & Brothers company associates with his purchase of a $500 assortment of golf clubs. Three years later, in 1895, Spalding was in the golf club business.

By the turn of the century, the game's popularity was starting to spread and with it the number of golf courses though many evidentally lost the struggle to survive. Old records show that the 952 courses listed in 1900 had dwindled to 742 by 1916. Then came the big surge in the late '20s and when GOLFDOM started in 1927 the course count had zoomed to over 4,800 and continued on to hit a total of 5,856 in 1930.

Here, in calendar order, I hope, are the companies that followed Spalding into the manufacture of golf equipment: In 1897 Crawford, MacGregor & Canby started golf club production in their Dayton, O., plant; in 1904 the Worthington Golf Ball plant at Elyria, O., began operating; Burke Golf Company, Newark, O., started turning out golf clubs, and in 1913 Chicago packer Thos. E. Wilson founded the company's sports division with L. B. Icely heading the operation. In recent years both Worthington and Burke became divisions of Victor Comptometer Corp. and MacGregor a division of Brunswick Corp.

The next entry into the golf field was Hillerich & Bradsby Company who began making clubs in 1914 at their Louisville, Ky., plant where for some years they had been turning out "Louisville Slugger" baseball bats. In 1916 "US Royal" golf balls were coming out of the US Rubber plant at Providence, R. I. Meanwhile, John Wanamaker's John Anderson with his "Silver Kings" and Dunlop's Tom Niblett with his "Dunlops" both imported—were making the rounds of the increasing number of pros.

In the early 30s Acushnet entered the golf ball fold with their New Bedford, Mass., plant. Golfcraft came along at the close of World War II in a modern Chicago plant shortly after which they began marketing the first of the "Glass-shaft" clubs.

Before—and for some time after the first few American golf manufacturers got going—the pros, mostly Scotsmen who had been trained in the art of making golf clubs, were busy turning out their benchmade models. These, with the equipment imported from Scotland helped get golf's roots established. With the introduction of steel shafts and their replacement of hickory, pro club making declined.

Union Hardware of Torrington, Conn., was the first to produce a seamless steel golf shaft, in 1923. Horton Mfg. Company, Bristol, Conn., soon followed with the marketing of their "Torsion" shaft. In 1927 American Fork & Hoe Company of Geneva, O., introduced their "Step Down" shaft. However, the winning of the USGA Open at Inverness in 1931 by Billie Burke playing steel shafted golf clubs really gave impetus to the demand for the clubs. Factor sales that year totaling $12,009,000, a figure unapproached until 1947 with its $17,082,000.

Club sales continued to climb over the years but in a seesaw pattern until 1957 with its $32,127,400 total. From then on, each year's sales showed substantial increases: 1958—$37,478,000; 1959—$41,596,384; 1960—$44,829,660; 1961—$54,474,680; 1962—$57,678,566; 1963 — $65,133,965; 1964 — $70,439,099; 1965—$77,947,048.

Golf ball sales followed the club sales pattern with 1957's reported sales of $21,111,080 starting a consistent annual increase: 1958—$22,912,081; 1959—$27,285,954; 1960—$31,605,955; 1961—$33,383,348; 1962—$38,277,996; 1963 — $40,889,292; 1964 — $43,473,126; 1965—$49,631,851.

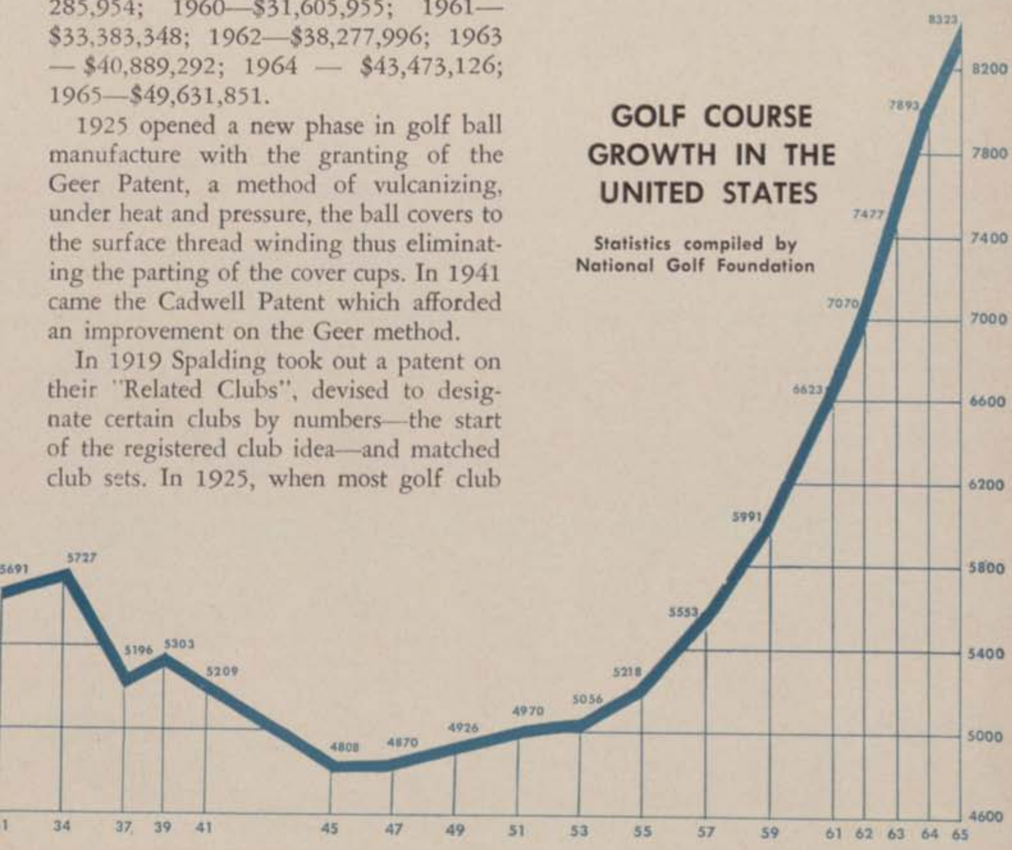
1925 opened a new phase in golf ball manufacture with the granting of the Geer Patent, a method of vulcanizing, under heat and pressure, the ball covers to the surface thread winding thus eliminating the parting of the cover cups. In 1941 came the Cadwell Patent which afforded an improvement on the Geer method.

In 1919 Spalding took out a patent on their "Related Clubs", devised to designate certain clubs by numbers—the start of the registered club idea—and matched club sets. In 1925, when most golf club grips were being imported from Scotland, Lamkin Leather started in Chicago with their specialized treatment and hand cutting of leather for golf grips. In 1949, Fawick Flexi-Grip of Akron, O., began producing a new composition grip that proved superior to an all-weather grip that had come and disappeared from the market.

Along the road of improvements in playing equipment came Wilson in the early 40s with their new laminated wood head, the "Stratabloc", and the impregnation of solid wood heads for moisture-proofing was adopted by many manufacturers. Golf bags and golf luggage of the post-war period refuse to admit the remotest kinship to their prewar counterparts. Modern bag design, materials, conveniences, colors and workmanship has canceled out any basis for comparison.

Turning to the advances made by the

continued on page 80



AND TO THINK

continued from page 35

pros I am not prepared to write the three volume book it would take to cover the subject, and the same goes for the superintendents and the managers.

With more players, playing more and spending more for improved equipment, today's pro shops are doing more business. But it must be remembered, that a sizeable percentage of golf items sold mostly through pro shops were unknown before World War II. Other older items of limited demand were revitalized after the war. Thus by 1966 new and better golf gloves, headcovers, umbrellas and the many other accessories had added over $7,000,000 to the industry's ball, club and bag sales figure.

However, golf apparel gets top billing for its vast post-war growth in pro shop non-equipment sales volume. Before WW II GOLFDOM had editorially campaigned on alerting pros to the business potential

continued on page 82

AND TO THINK

continued from page 80

awaiting them through the sales of golf apparel. The effort sliced out of bounds. Two years later, war put pro focus on soft goods—about the only merchandise that was available.

At war's end pros had been experienced and enthused to get apparel off and running at a pace that kept increasing until now I'd estimate it is accounting for 35% to 40% of the pros annual sales.

Many men and developments marked the milestones of the golf industry's advance before and during GOLFDOM's earlier years. One among the men whom thousands would agree stood tall and tireless working to increase golf's popularity and the industry's progress was Lawrence B. Icely.

Through the years from 1913 when he became president of the young sports equipment of Thos. E. Wilson & Company until his passing in 1950, as president of Wilson Sporting Goods Company, he was convinced, and the other leading golf manufacturers agreed, that their industry would grow and prosper only if they did their part to promote golf's popularity and encourage the building of more playing facilities. It is to the industry's credit that it rose to meet the needs of the game.

Thus, in 1936, following GOLFDOM's publication of a handbook devoted to the planning, promoting, building and operating golf courses, the leading manufacturers agreed with Herb and me that a clearing house was needed for information helpful in encouraging golf participation and golf facility development. We were put in charge of organizing and operating what started with the name PROmotion and later was renamed the National Golf Foundation.

At the start, and for some years, the clearinghouse operated on an uncertain budget because the manufacturers contributed to its support on a voluntary basis and the ante varied. But the annual pot kept increasing. The Foundation began in 1936 with around a $17,000 yearly budget when there were 4,800 golf courses and the total factory selling price

continued on next page

AND TO THINK

continued from preceding page

of golf balls and golf clubs was under \$11,000,000.

Among the manufacturers in at the start along with Wilson's L. B. Icely were: Spalding's Charles Robbins, Acushnet's Fred Bommer and Phil Young, U. S. Rubber's John Sproul, MacGregor's Clarence Rickey, Dunlop's Vinnie Richards, Golfcraft's Ted Woolley, Worthington's Jim Brydon and Bob Smith, True Temper's Gurdon Leslie and Kroydon's Camille Giaoard.

Conditions seemed perfect when we wheeled GOLFDOM onto the track but the nation's economic collapse in 1929 and the following depression years shifted the market into reverse, shrinking from 1930's 5,856 courses to 5,196 in 1937. From a low tidemark of 4,809 in 1945 golf courses slowly increased to 5,076 by 1954, then the speed-up with 5,991 in 1951, 6,385 in 1960, 7,477 in 1963 and 8,672 in 1966.

With rubber and steel frozen early in

1942 by war production, golf ball and club output came to a halt. Balata, however, managed to escape and, mixed with used ball material, was used in reconditioning golf balls.

Fortunately with the ever increasing golf course maintenance load, the introduction of new and improved machines, materials and chemicals is sharply pointed toward helping the superintendents keep pace with their course management problems and costs—particularly the steadily rising cost of labor.

Over the years the course equipment and supply manufacturers and their dealers have so greatly contributed to golf's growth. At the start Herb and I recognized the unique position held by the dealers and their special services in nourishing the growing, needing golf market, often at considerable financial risk. We learned a lot in working with them. •

Fourteen years ago

Ben Hogan came back to win his fourth U.S. Open Championship.