

Nick Lombardo, golf operator at Rancho Cañada is a firm believer in offering the golf course for fraternal, social and commercial organizations to use for their golf tournaments by DON CURLEE

What many public play golf operators want to do when they see outside golfing groups and tournaments headed their way is duck. They know these groups can choke off regular play, jam up the facilities and interfere with the routine.

But Nick Lombardo, the enterprising golf operator of Rancho Cañada GC on the Monterey Peninsula of California, stands tall, takes them all in, from 25 to 500 golfers at a time. He makes them feel like private club members for the day at his two 18-hole courses and sumptuous clubhouse. And don't feel that the two-course complex is necessary. Lombardo's promotion of tournament play began about four years ago when he was professional-manager at Del Monte GC in Monterey. Response to his golf hospitality there was so great that he began looking for roomier quarters.

The key to making this type of business profitable, Lombardo has found, is to offer the full range of Rancho Cañada's services in one tidy package. Lombardo prefers to think of it as a program, and he talks about programming each tournament to the needs of the group. "One of the major reasons for programming was to offset the constant haggling for price in the professional shop," he says. "Some of the groups were even bringing their tournament prizes with them." Except for one tournament sponsored by a men's store, merchandise for prizes comes from the Lombardo golf shop entirely now. "We've cap-

tured the prize market," he says.

A typical program includes the round of golf, a tee prize for every participant at the first tee, score keeping and posting, handicap computation (Calloway system not allowed), the use of golf cars, cocktails, dinner and presentation of the winners' prizes in the Rancho Cañada banquet room—all arranged supervised and supplied by Rancho Cañada. Even the dinner menu is thoughtfully selected well ahead of time in consultation between Lombardo and the tournament chairman of the visiting group. The cost per individual in a tournament ranges from \$10 to \$35, depending on the needs of the organization.

"No tournament chairman I know wants to sit in the clubhouse posting scores and worrying about handicapping and pairings while the members of the group are enjoying themselves on the course," Lombardo says. Fully sympathetic with the chairman's plight, Lombardo and Rancho Cañada take the entire load off his hands, beginning with promotional flyers and mailings to announce and build interest in the event. He assures the chairman that his staff of 40 is completely tuned to group needs, and he may call in golf course superintendent Larry Lloyd to discuss pin placement or bullseye marking for the hole-in-one contest. A quick tour of the clubhouse and its large kitchen facilities afford the chairman reassurance that this will be a memorable event.

Because repeat business is so important, Lombardo personally sees each program through to a successful completion, knowing the satisfaction of the participants is the stepping stone to further tournament play. He estimates that 70 per cent of the groups playing the course in 1971 were repeaters. Referrals by satisfied groups are now Lombardo's number one source of new business. But when he began promoting tournaments, Lombardo drafted letters "cold turkey" to long lists of

fraternal, commercial and social organizations inviting them to book their annual tournament with him. Now Lombardo boasts a list of 700 or more organizations which have scheduled tournaments at his courses. At Pajaro Valley GC in nearby Watsonville, also operated by Lombardo, another list of 200 groups is maintained. Although it hasn't been necessary to communicate with these groups regularly, the addresses are kept current in case it becomes advisable. Lombardo also operates Fig Garden GC in Fresno, in partnership with his brother-in-law, Gordon Knott.

Lombardo admits that he has lost some groups, which found they could hold their tournaments elsewhere cheaper. "But they often come back," he says, "after comparing our treatment with some other course's."

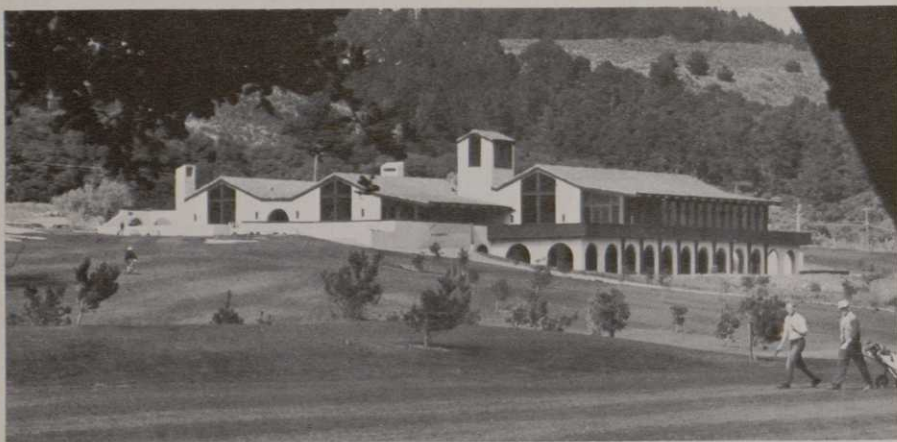
"We handle every group the same way a professional at a private club must conduct a tournament," Lombardo says. "This is in contrast to selling a golf round as a clerk sells a pair of shoes."

A special conference room near his office is available to the boards of directors, or golf committees of visiting groups if they need it. Just one of many special touches at Rancho Cañada.

"We operate 70 golf cars, and we may rent as many as 80 more for a big tournament just to be sure we don't have breakdowns or players without a chance to take a car," Lombardo says. Lombardo, who has been a golf professional for 24 years, does not think a professional without private club experience should conduct a program like his.

At the same time, he recognizes that the majority of golfers don't belong to private clubs, and because they don't, "they actually pay more for their golf than any club member." Lombardo feels they deserve a break, a taste of the private club atmosphere and treatment. "What business does the average golfer have playing difficult courses such

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as these?" Lombardo is often asked. "Golfers don't come to the Monterey Peninsula to play a mediocre golf course. They are looking for quality, something special."

The year-around population of the Monterey Peninsula is not large enough, Lombardo feels, to support the golf courses operating there. This is one of the reasons he has taken the tournament promotion route. Evidence that his Carmel neighbors appreciate his contribution to tourism is their election of him as president of the visitor and convention bureau. Although Lombardo doesn't minimize the effort, time and attention to detail required in this type of operation, he's convinced there is a place for it, and Rancho Cañada might as well be it. □

Rancho Cañada's beautiful clubhouse (top photo) houses Lombardo's golf shop, which is staffed by assistant professional Vaughn Ausman (left photo). On the right is one of the course's 36 holes.

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