

THE EXECUTIVE WAY

Executive courses, though short on yardage and par, can be long on sales and services by DOUGLAS LUTZ



In a farmhouse setting (above) the pro shop at Stony Brook features an attractive fireplace.

George Cosgrove's pro shop facilities at Heatherwood GC offer innovative service and display techniques for his merchandise, center photo.

On opposite page, Ernie Pagnotta, left, confers with assistant George Di Tullo in executive course pro shop at Stony Brook. The shop features a farmhouse atmosphere.

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The merchandising, service and display initiative that is shown at some executive courses could provide their larger, regulation course competitors with valuable insights to financial success.

To meet the challenge from nearby regulation layouts as well as from shopping center discount stores, owners and professionals at these "in between" courses usually spare no expense on attractive displays and well-stocked shops. Innovative sales and service plans seem to be much in evidence as well.

While researching the metropolitan New York area for a book, the "Metropolitan Golf Guide," I visited 77 individual municipal, public and semi-private courses within a 50-mile radius of New York City. In that circle there were just four executive courses. Oddly enough, the finest pro shops I found belonged to the four "capsule" layouts. Was it coincidence or design?

In a general sense, a basic spirit of innovation prevailed at these four courses. Perhaps specialized needs generate specialized responses. Fine display work was utilized throughout. Service plans—tailor-made. Inventive sales devices—commonplace.

The Stony Brook GC, a par-62 layout in Hopewell, N.J., ranges 3,603 yards over rolling hillocks and mounded greens, making a spectacular course out of former

farmlands. In addition to challenging golf, Stony Brook offers its membership a practice range, practice sand trap, two swimming pools, a picnic area and a children's playground.

Amiable Ernie Pagnotta, head professional, has very cleverly turned half the ground floor of the 108-year-old farmhouse into one of the most attractive pro shops in the metropolitan area. Utilizing the original old front parlor and dining room, which open to each other through a wide arch in the center wall, he has provided his customers with just the right touch of homey atmosphere.

As you enter from the small front porch and turn right off the center hall, you find yourself in the front parlor surrounded by colorful displays of soft goods and accessories. An antique sideboard between the front windows, which are draped in tie-backs, as they must have been many years ago, holds accessories at easy-to-see eye level. In a corner the original built-in hutch, triangular in shape, features soft goods on its base and shelves. The center area of the 20 by 20-foot room is occupied by a soft goods/accessories "tree" display set in a nail keg. All in all, an eye-catching array of goods.

When the golfer goes to register, he must pass by all these displays, which spill on into the dining room. The shoe corner, for instance, fronts on the old fireplace and mantel; directly opposite are the club and bag racks. Not until he has seen all these items does the customer reach the registration desk, which is set in the back of the shop. It probably would have been simpler to locate the registration just inside the front door. More convenient, perhaps, but not as conducive to browsing, according to Ernie Pagnotta. "You've got to have a traffic flow through your shop," he says. "The way we're situated, our customers have to pass by all our merchandise on the way in and again on the way out to the first tee. Invariably someone spots a bag up on the wall he may have been looking for or something else will catch his eye. We've had good response from our shop layout."

Pagnotta and his assistant,

George DiTullo, concentrate on individual needs. Pagnotta says, "Monthly equipment specials are one of our chief sales devices. We feature something each month and try to customer fit our clientele. They get the sale price and personalized attention." Emphasis is on hard goods, which account for 60 per cent of sales.

Unique pricing plans are another Stony Brook innovation. Pagnotta introduced some new ideas this season. Green fees on Mondays are \$1 less than the rest of the weekdays as they are for women on Fridays before 11 p.m. Twilight golf with registration after 5:30 p.m. is available to all, members and non-members, at \$2 on weekdays and \$3 on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. Play is limited only by impending darkness.

Associate memberships are offered under two plans. Class A at \$150 a year per person offers unlimited golf; Class B membership at \$15 a year features reduced green fees. Handicap service, not usually a management function at most public courses, is offered free under either membership plan.

Tournaments are organized and run with no entry fee charges and trophies are provided for the winners at Pagnotta's expense. There are available to all members the Club Championship, President's Cup, Senior and Junior and Ladies' Tournaments.

Electric car rentals carry their own pricing structure. Two bags for \$6, three for \$8 and four for \$10 could be considered out of the ordinary when car fees in the area generally run \$8 to \$10 for 18 holes and are not priced according to the number of bags carried.

Pagnotta recently expounded his feelings about executive courses. "Families seem more united today, especially those with youngsters. The executive course gives dad a chance to play, maybe in three hours or so, and still have time to spend with the family. Also, the course is not too frustrating for women. As a result, we see many families out. We have lots of family play."

By providing specialized pricing structures, individual attention, attractive merchandise dis-

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plays and encouraged tournament activity and family play, Ernie Pagnotta, George DiTullo and the Stony Brook GC may be showing the way toward a successful business operation.

Getting it all together in the relaxed and homey atmosphere that Stony Brook offers might provide some insights worthy of imitation at more pretentious layouts.

In the never ending competitive situation facing most executive course professionals, particularly those not far removed from the very real threat of highway discount stores, Mickey Traina's shop at the Two Bridges CC may be especially noteworthy. Two Bridges is located in the Lincoln Park/Two Bridges area of New Jersey, on the edge of large population concentrations serviced by many shopping centers ribboned along the highways. Until this season, in keeping with the fine brand of golf to be offered here, Traina's shop rivaled the best to be found at private clubs. Soon it may outstrip them completely!

Traina, not satisfied to have just a great looking shop, has torn it completely apart. In a bold move at the beginning of a new season, he is now in the midst of an extensive renovation program guaranteed to provide the finest pro shop facility available to the non-affiliated golfer in northern New Jersey.

Many shops have been torn apart and rebuilt. It's not unusual. What is unusual is to find an exceptional shop to begin with and then find a professional backed by a management insisting on further improvement. The continual striving for excellence, as exemplified by Two Bridges, is commonplace at executive courses.

As I sat talking with Mort Hansen we were continually interrupted by the cash register ringing. The beautiful sound reflected a busy Saturday at Bel Aire, an exceptional executive course in Allenwood, N.J. And it was the first day of the young season to be blessed with a little sunshine!

Hansen greeted each customer personally, mostly on a first name basis. Old friendships were being revived. There was much talk of

Florida trips and the golfing delights of Southern resorts and warmer weather. Many customers expressed their good feelings about being back at Bel Aire to welcome the new season. The New Jersey shore area was coming alive again after a rain-chilled, dismal winter. Nowhere was this more evident than in the beautiful Bel Aire pro shop. And Hansen wasn't even set up yet for the new season!

Mort Hansen doesn't feel he is any great authority on how to operate a pro shop. He feels his business practices are not unusual. He thinks anyone using common sense and following suggestions gleaned from golf publications on how to run sales, set up displays and promote merchandise can be a successful golf businessman. Hansen's modest attitude, while commendable, can-



A nail keg supports display of accessories at Stony Brook GC.

not hide the fact that he operates an exceptionally busy place. True, he is ideally situated. Within a few miles of Bel Aire are at least six regulation courses. Spring Meadow, a crowded semi-private layout is just down the road. This season, for the first time in 30 years or more, there will be no competition from Homestead in Spring Lake, about three miles east of Bel Aire. Real estate developers have plowed it under. Hansen may not care to admit it, but he knows how to meet the competition.

Beginning with one of the most handsome shops around (when it is fully set up), Hansen is meeting the needs of the golfers in his area who prefer the executive length and the

shorter day away from home. There are many retirement communities nearby, which could lead to the conclusion that the bulk of Bel Aire's trade is the old crowd. Not so. There is a cross section of golfers to be found any day at Bel Aire: young and old, families, duffers and low handicappers, too.

The most important single factor to be learned about success at Bel Aire is in watching Hansen's personalized approach to every detail. He cares. He makes it his business to know everyone, to greet every individual with a degree of importance and to make sure they leave the shop, whether on their way to the first tee or homeward bound after a round, feeling satisfied.

When you sell a man a set of replacement spikes for a buck, then insist that he leave his shoes with you to replace the spikes for him, you are providing service not measurable by monetary standards. When you take an important telephone message for someone still out on the course and don't write it down, but deliver it verbatim when he comes in—that's service. At Bel Aire a bowl of tees sits on the check-in counter. They're free, and customers are urged to help themselves. There is no better way to serve a need than that.

Mort Hansen's success is assured at this executive course, because his close attention to detail, manifested in personalized service and superb customer handling, will make it happen. Soaring sales will probably keep Bel Aire's cash register ringing all season.

"Trading is the key. We do a big business in used clubs," George Cosgrove says. Cosgrove, head professional at Heatherwood GC in South Setauket, Long Island, was pointing to a sign he put up about nine years ago. It read, "Yes. We take Trade Ins."

In what is essentially a 10-month season Cosgrove reports annual grosses of \$80,000. Seventy-five per cent of that is in hard goods. Apparently his "trading" schemes are working.

"With our reputation for trading," Cosgrove explains, "we can sometimes count on selling a good set of clubs for, say \$190, two seasons in a row. Many of our golfers

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are new to the game and our executive length is to their liking, but they may not be ready for a big investment in new sets. We make sure to have good used sets around. After one season they may want to trade in their used sets for new ones, and then we'll resell the same used set for the same price. Good quality clubs are always in demand."

Cosgrove takes his trading techniques to other courses in the area, and by offering new merchandise to his fellow professionals, he manages excellent deals on good used merchandise.

Using this procedure, he fills a need, too. Requests from Heatherwood players for specific name brands that he may not have on hand are met by shopping around among his fellow professionals.

To encourage a steady flow of new golfers Cosgrove and his assistant, Ken Woitesek, teach night school adult education classes in the area. Additionally, group lessons are given at Strathmore Gate East, a nearby retirement community. "They're all potential golfers," Cosgrove says, "and we're interested in helping them get started."

Another method utilized to involve new golfers is a service performed for beginners. Old three and four woods are cut down to junior size by Cosgrove and Woitesek, then regripped and frequently given free to youngsters. "Three and four woods are best because of their loft," says Cosgrove. "Drivers are too hard to handle for beginners."

Innovation and service are key words in the beautifully appointed Heatherwood shop. It would be simple to sit back and let people come in, because almost certainly they would. The layout of the course itself is superb. An elusive par of 60 spreading 4,413 yards through a Long Island scrub pine forest, it is probably the finest test for this length to be found in the East. But Cosgrove doesn't sit back and wait. He initiates plans that get talked about and bring in results.

Typical Heatherwood innovation is the available caddie list. "Naturally, we're in the electric car rental business," Cosgrove says, "but when they're out of service or the course is too wet and we get a

call from one of our regulars, we go to the caddie list and line up someone. We have about a dozen boys we can call on. Costs the golfer \$6 a bag, but we don't lose the green fee in addition to the lost car rental."

When a customer completes a hard goods purchase, his name is passed unobtrusively to Ken Woitesek, who immediately stamps the name on a Heatherwood bag tag using one of those plastic strip stamping machines. Before the customer leaves the shop, he has been given his own name tag, frequently without his even knowing how it happened.

Recently, Cosgrove started a women's club consisting of 40 members who play on Tuesdays. To properly service their needs he brought into the shop his wife Barbara, who works Tuesdays only. "I feel a woman who can model some of the soft goods and help out with some of the difficult fitting problems that a man cannot handle or that might cause some embarrassment will be a big asset to our soft goods sales," Cosgrove explains. "Soft goods are now moving. We're giving the women club members a 10 per cent discount on all merchandise."

With a total outlay of approximately \$100, Cosgrove was able to provide each of the women club members with a gift kit consisting of a club towel, bag tag with each member's name affixed, a 1972 rule book, a local rules pamphlet and a small handy purse. He presented the kits as a surprise to each member at a recent club meeting. The reaction, of course, was tremendously enthusiastic. The goodwill engendered will no doubt be reflected in later sales.

Innovation in display work is a Heatherwood feature, too. Hats and caps now are suspended from ceiling beams rather than being attached to the center posts, as they used to be. "We used to display merchandise on the posts, but customers kept knocking them down, and now we've opened the center up, too," Cosgrove reports. The uncluttered center of the shop makes browsing easier because merchandise is ranged along the walls. Skirts and blouses are stacked in covered clear plastic boxes for

easy see through shopping and dust free storage.

Cosgrove recommends local banking, based on his own arrangements. "Banking just across the highway, all my deposits become immediate cash, which is something to be considered when obligations need to be met quickly," he says. He has also signed up with one of the charge account plans. From his rationale, it might be worth thinking about. "Frequently a golfer making a decision on a large purchase will be reluctant to spend cash or write a check. If he can charge it, the decision is a lot easier to make."

George Cosgrove exemplifies the executive course professional. Recognizing the specific needs of his golfers and providing service plans to fit these needs makes for a highly successful operation at Heatherwood.

Executive courses, according to National Golf Foundation statistics, now number about 353 and there is every indication that more are on the way. (There is now no precise figure on the number of executive courses, because tabulation on them by the NGF only began in 1971.) Many experts have expressed that opinion and recognized the trend toward the shorter length.

If the present operations of their pro shops are any barometer of just how successful the "little" guys can be, perhaps they can provide the alternative to the demise of overtaxed regulation courses unable to resist real estate developers' enticing offers.

Perhaps the salvation for the future golfing fraternity, particularly near large urban areas, lies in executive courses. Certainly some of the business practices of executive course professionals can be adapted with equal success by their regulation competitors. □

DOUGLAS LUTZ, a native New Yorker, is a television production veteran of 21 years. He spends his spare time writing—mostly on golf. In addition to contributing to national golf magazines, he wrote and illustrated the *Metropolitan Golf Guide*, a guide to 77 public courses within 50 miles of New York City.