





PRO WITH THE GOLDEN TOUCH

The California Gold Rush is still on at Haggin Oaks, and the miner is a unique and successful municipal course professional

By Douglas Lutz

"We held the line in 1971, and we're shooting for a \$400,000 gross in 1972."

This incredibly optimistic note was sounded recently by Tommy Lo Presti, head professional at Haggin Oaks Municipal GC in Sacramento, Calif. It was typical Lo Presti!

For almost 40 years Lo Presti has flourished in a sometimes lean, occasionally tight, always competitive, market. Even today in what many consider a declining market he remains optimistic. The buying and selling practices of this highly successful municipal course professional are worth examining. In a broad sense municipal course professionals are not expected to make a lot of money. Volume sales are secondary to providing the basic needs of the community's golfers. Lo Presti, however, has never subscribed to those theories.

Long before serious business practices were applied by most shop operators in favor of the social and "fun" aspects of being a golf professional, Lo Presti was mining some of Sacramento's gold. In the late twenties and early thirties, Gene Sarazen, with whom Lo Presti had been pursuing elusive purses on the tour, told him to give it up and go into business, make the business of golf pay off. It was the best advice Lo Presti could have had and he has never been sorry he followed it.

Taking over Haggin Oaks, already established as a fine public golf course, Lo Presti soon turned the service shop into a money maker. In a unique arrangement, as far as municipal courses go, he did not have to share revenues with the city. The pro shop was his own business. That procedure remained in effect until 1970 when Sacramento and Lo Presti entered into a new arrangement whereby he gives up 6 per cent of the first \$150,000 and 10 per cent thereafter. Still a damn good deal, according to Lo Presti. Of course, by 1970 he was already grossing in six figures every year and he could

afford to be generous!

When the boom hit in the fifties, Lo Presti's business practices were firmly established and operating smoothly. The influx was taken in stride. While others floundered and were unable to gauge the new volumes, he simply continued business as usual—only on a grander scale.

Reflecting on the rough years through the Depression and the tight years during World War II, Lo Presti says, "We've seen some lean years, but during the past 10 years we've seen golf come up from practically nothing in this community into a big business." With yearly grosses running to \$490,000 for quite a few years, he was surely talking about his own pro shop business, too.

Part of Lo Presti's selling philosophy could serve as a guide to guaranteed financial success at other public course shops. Particularly because he feels most municipal and public course professionals don't handle their customers with enough concern. He offers the following advice, "Too many pros underrate their buyers, give them second and third rate treatment. Every golfer is a king. Treat him like you would a country club member. Most pros only cater to the man who spends money with them. Remember, the poor boy and the teenager of today may be a doctor or dentist or own a gas station some day and have a little dough to spend." Sound advice. And Lo Presti's sales results back up his right to give advice, too.

Haggin Oaks, which has been characterized as the country club of Northern California public golf, spreads an 18 and two nines of gently rolling terrain over a verdant plain on the edge of Sacramento; 78,000 rounds a year on the 18-hole course and 35,000 on each of the two nines insure a steady flow of pro shop customers. Every golfer, even those who sign up a week ahead for a reserved starting time on the 18-hole layout, must go through the pro shop to check in before registering with the starters. As manager of the course for the city, Lo Presti has seen to that. Incidentally, all six full time starters are Lo Presti employees. Reservations are taken only on the 18. The two nines are sold separately, on a first come, first served basis. "If a man signs up for the Blue nine, he must finish that

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nine and come in again to sign up for the Red nine," Lo Presti explains. "In the meantime he looks around the shop, maybe he buys a little merchandise or goes down to the range to hit some balls. This is what we think is good business." The system must be working. The driving range alone accounts for 10 per cent of the yearly gross.

Scanning advertising in all the golf publications for the new "hot" items and immediately making them available is common practice at Haggin Oaks. Lo Presti places his orders by long distance telephone, if necessary, in order to give his customers a choice of new merchan-

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dise. "We run up some tremendous telephone bills around here, but we get the merchandise to the buyers as quickly as we can," Lo Presti reports. "Many orders are rushed out by airmail, too. Of course, all the 'hot' items go for the full price, but we're giving golfers what they want."

End of season sales, bulk buying and year-end closeouts have been Lo Presti shopping markets for more than 35 years. "When you buy someone's surplus of 500 or 1,000 dozen golf balls, you can get pretty good buys and good prices," Lo Presti says. "Recently I bought 500 dozen on a closeout deal of \$1 a ball. We invested about \$1,600 and passed some of our savings onto our customers. We make the ball a special at \$5.95 a dozen after paying only \$3.25 a dozen. In mid-season, we would pay \$7.20 a dozen for the same ball. Normal 40 per cent at \$3.25 would give us a profit of \$1.28 per dozen, but at \$5.95 each, we made twice that and still gave our regulars an exceptional buy on a good standard ball. In other words, we served a need and did better than we would at standard buying and selling prices.

"On the other hand," Lo Presti continues, "sometimes you take less and give more. Like the time one of

our friends was going on vacation and wanted a particular shoe. By the time we could get it in from the East he would be gone—and unhappy, too. We called the manufacturer in the East and had a single pair shipped out airmail special. By the time we paid the phone bill and airmail costs the profit had narrowed down to about 10 per cent. The payoff came when the same guy bought a full set of clubs later that same season. Again, service paid off. It's one thing to have merchandise available or bend over backwards to get it, but personal service goes a long way. It's sometimes more important to a customer than the feeling that he's getting a good buy."

Shoes and balls combined can usually be counted on to gross \$70,000 or more a year. About 18 per cent of gross, according to Lo Presti.

"One thing we've always tried to do," Lo Presti says, "is have enough



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merchandise around to give our customers a choice. Too many professionals get tied into one company's staff and they try to jam the items or line they're representing down the throats of the members. There's nothing wrong with being on a staff, but pushing a line should only be attempted when a customer is undecided."

Soft goods, the elusive part of any

sales operation in which many a professional has found himself trapped in over-ordering only to find what he has to offer is already out of style, gets a big boost from the women in Lo Presti's shop. With special attention to the women at Haggin Oaks, Lo Presti has managed to realize the great potential in soft goods. "Most pros are missing a good bet on

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women's soft goods," Lo Presti says. He has been doing about 12 per cent a year in soft goods.

The demand for women's play at Haggin Oaks has been so high that Lo Presti expanded the original women's club, then added a second and a third group. The women now number more than 315. To prepare for the new season style changes, fashion shows are arranged for the women's clubs tournament dinners. "Last Christmas season," Lo Presti relates, "we ran three fashion shows in conjunction with our awards dinners." As usual models were chosen from among the members and they were offered 20 per cent discounts on the clothes they modeled. "It stimulates the other women to buy so they can be dressed up, too. We probably have the best dressed women in municipal golf in California," Lo Presti reports with a smile.

Ken Morton, Lo Presti's associate pro for 17 years, was recently made a full partner. Ken attends to most of the soft goods buying, accessories, and so on, while Lo Presti concentrates on the hard goods. With almost 40 years in this Sacramento market place, he knows it well.

"We feature many lines," he says. "We'll try them all. That way we offer a wide choice. Many public course players can't afford to be changing whole sets, so we make sure there are plenty of single putters, wedges and drivers around. These are particularly easy to pick up at closeouts and year-end sales."

Lo Presti's shop also has been used by manufacturers to promote and test market new club lines, so Lo

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Presti's customers have the added advantage of seeing the latest and most innovative features in golf equipment.

A few months ago Dick Madsak moved on from the teaching pro slot at Haggin Oaks to head professional at Valley High, a private club in the area. Lo Presti in typical fashion moved Tom Shanke, who had been Madsak's assistant, up to the top spot. Now Shanke will be responsible for about \$40,000 of the gross each year. That's what teaching, with a

small assist from rentals, brings in.

Rudy Lozano is operations manager in charge of selling, the starters and tournament details. Bruce Cud-

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dy, a young professional on the way up, splits his time between working the starting boards and selling on the floor. He is also breaking in as back-up man on club repairs. Haggin

Oaks offers a unique service in the form of Mike Silva. Pursuing a lost art, Silva is an expert on club repairs. Practically a factory expert, according to Lo Presti. So much so that he handles repairs from the entire Sacramento area in addition to the needs at Haggin Oaks.

Morton, Shanke, Lozano, Cuddy and Silva, a formidable professional force, offer Haggin Oaks' golfers the kinds of service Lo Presti feels are vital to success.

Another innovation in the repair line that keeps the customers coming in is one hour repair service on Bag Boy carts. A complete stock of parts is kept on hand. "Browse while you wait" usually adds to the revenues. As Lo Presti says, "Any golfer looking around that shop is likely to buy something. You've got to have ways to keep people coming in."

Lo Presti has turned Sacramento's golf to personal advantage, too. He owns two short courses in the area. The Perkins Golf Center, a par 72 layout, has been his for 14 years. Last year he added Lyndale Golf Center, a par 29, which is now being rebuilt. Both courses are equipped with driving ranges. Lo Presti feels short courses are one answer for many golfers who don't have time for a full 18 holes. "The young housewife with children at school. Salesmen on the road with a few hours to kill. Businessmen looking for a quick nine. Teenagers after school. These are the customers," Lo Presti says.

Just 35 miles northeast of Haggin Oaks, where the American and Feather Rivers meet, gold was discovered in 1848 at John Sutter's sawmill. The California Gold Rush was on. Fort Sutter became Sacramento and California became the Golden State. To this day some Californians continue to mine gold. Tommy Lo Presti, unique among municipal course professionals, is certainly getting his share of Sacramento's gold. □

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.

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