

STATUS REPORT:

Pro Shop BUSINESS 1973

WEST

by DON CURLEE

SAN FRANCISCO—It was a case of "East meets West" for golf merchandisers in the West this year after a prolonged rainy and cool season showed professionals what it's like to be practically shut down for months at a time.

Even so, play and purchasing resumed in April, and May and June set records for some pro shops. In spite of the January to March forced layoff, most professionals here expect 1973 to equal or surpass 1972 in volume.

Not surprisingly, the item most in demand by consumers has been clubs, mostly the result of interest in investment cast irons, heel-toe balance, graphite shafts and some new manufacturers in the equipment field that are giving the club market an interesting twist.

Ball sales are better than expected in almost every shop that was contacted. There is strong demand for balls with the Surlyn cover and those with new dimple patterns or other distinctive features and improvements.

Beyond that, shoes are the best selling items, and perhaps the only other piece of merchandise professionals are excited about. The heaviest shoe business is being done in the \$25 to \$35 range, even for professionals at well-established private clubs.

Enthusiasm is waning rapidly for soft goods, especially for women. As one public course professional in Fresno put it, "The women at my course are making their own

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CENTRAL

by JOE DOAN

CHICAGO—Some men curse the darkness; others light a candle, which describes the extremes in the states of mind of two area professionals, surveyed in mid-June concerning business conditions at their shops for the first 10 weeks of 1973. As for 18 others, who were queried, their replies ran from "lousy" to "not too bad considering the weather." A kind of loose summing up of the reports from the 20 professionals shows that from Highland Park to Kankakee and Aurora-Joliet to the Lake, business was off by approximately 10 per cent. Not from 1972, which was equally bad, but from the pro's anticipated or hoped-for volume.

The weather was roundly re-

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EAST

by STEPHEN W. BYERS

NEW YORK—If you rushed into an Eastern pro shop between nines to buy protection against a capricious sky, you'd probably be advised to settle your ardor for the second nine and watch those arbitrary black clouds from the safety of the bar, unless being wet to the skin improves your game. But try to bridle your pique at the helpless shrug of the club professional; there was no way he could predict the relentless wet deluge that has, thus far, sabotaged the '73 Eastern golf season, leaving in its path empty shelves where rain gear used to be and a 50 per cent sales drop under '72 reflected by the surplus merchandise jamming the rest of the shop.

Professionals have expressed little optimism that even clear skies accompanied by a buying surge could rescue the 1973 selling season from a "record low" statistical epilogue.

This season has been variously described by professionals as "the most consistently nasty golfing weather I can recall and I've been in the business 19 years," and this more despondent pro's observation, "A season like this in '74 will find me in another business."

The Mill River Plan (Ray Montgomery), the Multiple Sales Plan (Craig Shankland) and divers other sales techniques helped a few indomitable pros to mellow their description of the '73 selling season from "disastrous" to "inauspicious." These few undaunted

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golf clothes from doubleknit fabrics. It has become a matter of pride among them—who can come up with the best color coordination and styles. You can't compete with that by selling off the rack."

He admitted that private course members in his area probably are more inclined to buy apparel lines.

He plans to use his location to better advantage in regard to soft goods. His area, he said, is about a year behind the metropolitan areas of San Francisco and Los Angeles in styles, so he plans to stock up for next year on styles that are good this year in the urban areas.

Although the apparel outlook is dim for most professionals, one private club professional in Oakland said that the only growth he can foresee for his shop is in soft goods, and he lumps golf gloves with apparel in this category. He says that his members are somewhat confused about the wide range of club features, some of which he feels the golf industry branded as old fashioned not long ago—torque and the convex sole wedge, for example.

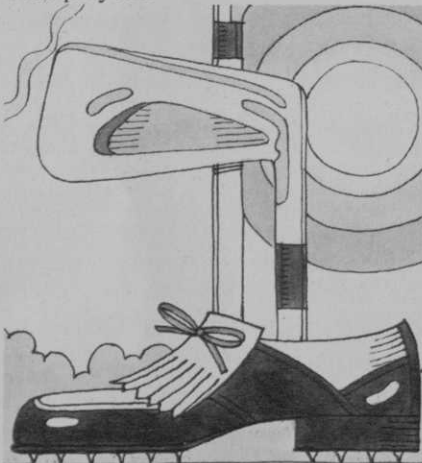
Another professional at a public course in Oakland, who runs several other sales outlets, said that demand for graphite-shafted clubs has been far ahead of supply during

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viled, as it is so often in the spring, but all was not despair. Following seven fully or partly washed-out weekends in April to May, two, and at most places, three, fine golf playing days were ushered in for the Memorial Day holiday and business immediately started humming. For the next two weeks the hum continued, carrying through a day when the temperature hit a record 94 degrees and two others when it reached 90. The heat wasn't dissuading anyone from playing golf; now that the rain was over and gone and the sun had broken through, there was great enthusiasm for making up the spring's lost rounds. From June 1 through the 17th most courses were swamped with players.



"If the weather holds through the summer," three out of five professionals say, "we'll make up what we lost in April and May." There is not unanimity of opinion on this, however. One out of three shop operators resolutely maintains that sales lost in the spring are never recouped.

But to get back to the allusion about darkness and lighting a candle, and first accentuating the positive:

Early in May, Bill Heald of Riverside GC, just southwest of Chicago's city limits, was sitting around watching the rain beat down on the putting clock in front of the shop. He was feeling somewhat inclined to self-commiseration due to the rather sad state of business. Club sales, though, weren't bad, and the male members were doing

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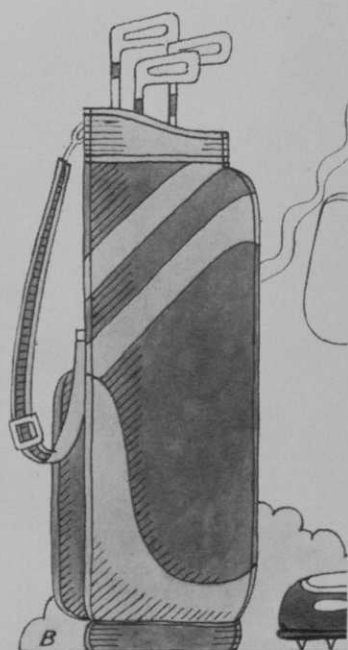
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were joined by some club pros in Florida, who enjoyed a fruitful peak season in a mild, dry '73 winter. For them, the predictable intermittent daily showers of summer occur in the off season and do little harm to total annual sales.

Craig Shankland, head professional at Middle Bay CC, admits that even his Multiple Sales Plan has only partially mollified what has been the worst selling season in his years at Middle Bay. Over-all, Shankland has struggled to maintain a fair measure of the axiom in pro shop merchandising—the 40 per cent markup.

Until this season his Multiple Sales Plan, a program that offers progressive discounts for members who buy items in multiples (i.e., 10 per cent off for a single item purchase, 20 per cent off for two items and 30 per cent off for three), had exploded his pro shop sales but, as Shankland's pro shop coordinator, Bruce Neinstad, says, "With weather like we've been getting it would be hard to draw a crowd if you were giving merchandise away." Aside from bad weather, one pro cited as the reason for his slow '73 season, that much of his membership maintains winter residences in the South and stayed there later this season, some as late as the end of April.

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the past two to three months. He feels that the investment cast irons have stimulated his sales substantially, and in spite of the layoff during the bad weather, he expects his gross to be up by 20 per cent over 1972.

Nevertheless, he felt the sag when the rains kept players away for weeks at a time. "They lose the golf bug after a while, and it's hard to get started again," he said.

One private club professional (Menlo Park) found a surprising accessory item this year in belts, even though he carries a very limited inventory of soft goods and merchandise generally.

He echoed what some of the other professionals said when he specified the woods from a local Bay Area club manufacturer as his best seller during the past few months. This clubmaker has nudged into the market enthusiastically.

Similarly, "make up" bags by specialty manufacturers have been a strong item for one public course professional in San Jose. He orders golf bags from a Los Angeles manufacturer made to his order, eliminating some features his customers aren't interested in, incorporating a wider and often longer strap and selling them below the price of name bags. He estimates his total bag sales at about 150 a month.

Although most of the professionals seemed concerned about keeping in stock a sufficient supply of new clubs, one complained of competition by the downtown shops specializing in close-outs in the Martinez area. "We're getting away from the average run of merchandise," he said. "We're steering away from the manufacturer that promotes close-outs."

Another municipal course professional in San Mateo said the higher price of some of the investment cast irons are not holding back his players. He has enjoyed brisk shoe sales in the \$28 to \$30 bracket and expects over-all volume to be about the same as 1972 in spite of flooding, which made his course unplayable for nearly three months. "The shop was open," he said, "but nobody was around."

A professional at a municipal course in Berkeley is building business around low-priced merchandise—shoes at \$22.50 and a 20 per cent discount on all ball sales.

"Our predecessors here tried to sell \$40 to \$50 shoes, and it just didn't create any volume. We'll move up in price and quality when we find what is right for our clientele," he said, "but we're offering the best quality for the price that golfers can get anywhere."

He has found that slacks in the \$10 to \$12 range sell, so he stocks and displays them attractively in styles and patterns the competing department stores don't supply. He is one of the few professionals surveyed who is excited about apparel sales this year.

They all agree on one point—the poor quality of last winter's weather and on merchandising plans in case of a repeat performance—stock plenty of water skis. □

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something about stocking up on the season's attire. But the women were only looking and not buying, as is their wont in rainy weather. Something was needed to stir them. A sale? No self respecting pro is going to run a sale on women's wear in May, Bill decided, even though he was itching to start liquidating it. But a sale in the early season is poor psychology.

Then inspiration struck Heald. He could run a sale without using that opprobrious word by an ingenious method of discounting merchandise. Here is what he did: He made up envelopes in which 10 per cent discounts were granted to about 85 or 90 per cent of his women customers. The remaining envelopes contained discounts ranging up to 25 per cent. The envelopes were sealed, then drawn by lot, but nobody was permitted to unseal an envelope until after a purchase was made.

The composite discount was about 12 or 13 per cent, considerably lower than the 20 or 25 Heald would have been expected to give if he had put on a bona fide sale. The gambling instincts of his female members were whetted, and sales for the short period in which the envelope scheme was in force

was brisk. It is an idea that perhaps can be copied by other professionals who are pressed to get some of their money out of their stock and, at the same time, don't want to give the franchise away.

But where Heald saw fit to light a candle, there is a cohort at a Northside club who can't get the gloom or darkness out of his system. He wonders if the pro shop business is ever going to come back to what it was a few years ago. "For the last two or three years we have kept telling ourselves that it has been the weather that has hurt us," says this man, "but maybe we're not facing up to the facts. Our troubles may go deeper than that."

All is not lost, though, in the shop of this pro who, incidentally, has a reputation of being an imaginative and successful merchandiser and has some good seasons behind him. Club sales have been high in 1973 at his club, largely because, as he states, manufacturers have shown imagination in retooling their products and even more imagination in advertising the changes they have introduced. His ball sales for the season will probably get back to normal, although off to a slow start, because of the weather.

GOLFDOM's survey was made by telephone. The mood of the 20 pros who were interviewed was somewhere in between restrained optimism and predictions that if the weather holds through July and August the pro will squeak through and have a fair season. When asked about the over-all sales picture, the first reaction of about three out of five pros was to pronounce it as not being good, but there were immediate qualifications. "It has picked up a lot since Memorial Day," was the way these were usually worded. "Everyone is bursting to get out and play. Traffic is way up in the last two weeks and that's what it takes to make sales. From here on, everything depends on the weather. There's a lot of money around, people seem to be more willing to spend than they have in two or three years, and if we can keep them coming to the club we'll struggle back to having a fair season in spite of the early setback."

There isn't much doubt that club sales in April and May were all that

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kept the shopmasters from locking their doors and heading back to wherever they retreat in the winter-time. Twelve of 20 pros reported club sales as "good"; three others gave them a "good plus" rating; and another three adjudged them the "best they ever had." Only two said they were off from last year. Better balancing of weight in the heel, toe and sole of the irons, and the shifting of weight higher and forward so that it's more in line with the shaft in the woods are said to account for the principal refinements in the 1973 models. These improvements were well advertised and many golfers apparently were impressed by what was said in the copy.

The new graphite shaft! Few people in the Chicago area seem to be getting excited about it. The pros' reply when asked about the shaft was pretty close to a copyrighted, unanimous. "We get a mixed reaction from players who have tried graphite." In the next breath cost is mentioned and then there is a trailing off to the opinion that most people seem to be waiting to see how the shaft is accepted. Only about half of the pros confess to being curious enough about the shaft to have tried it themselves.

Rainwear, surprisingly, wasn't a big seller this spring, undoubtedly because, as two or three pros pointed out, most people were wearing the gear they bought in 1972. However, one top line of waterproof shoe got a big play at several clubs. One Southside pro sold more than 150 pairs, and at another club it was necessary to place three substantial re-orders to meet demand.

As of mid-June golf ball sales were still lagging. A few pros reported they were coming close to catching up as of that date, but generally sales were 10 per cent below what they should have been. The conclusion of one pro is that "you can't lose 15 playing days in May, including three weekends and expect to break any records for the year. All you can do is hope to come out even for the season." There is general concurrence in that statement.

Men's wear sales held up quite well this spring in spite of the weath-

er and slowdown in shop traffic. About half of the pros pronounced their volume as "good" or "satisfactory" and most of the remainder were greatly encouraged by the way it improved after June 1. Doubleknits are beginning to trail off, although one company is credited with coming to the rescue to some extent with its polyester-cotton blend. Shirt sales are nearly as good as can be expected. Slack sales, as of mid-June, were dragging a little, but several pros feel they would have suffered even more if manufacturers hadn't had the foresight to splash them with color, almost to the point of giddiness.

Checkered, erratic, words of this ilk, describe women's sales. "Extra good" to "terrible" cover the pros' summation of them, with the net result being sub-par. As usual, there is the threat of dropping women's wear altogether, but this is heard every year. One pro says the reason he hasn't closed out female attire permanently is that he's afraid it would hurt his other sales. Another points out that if there is any place in which the pro shop gets hurt in competition with downtown stores, it's in the women's line.

However, by mid-June, women's softwear sales were picking up everywhere, but not more than one in five pros was expecting to recoup the lost spring volume. One advantage of the early June spurt is that the summer close-out sale will be pushed back and there won't be as much women's merchandise to dispose of. For the season, this will make the conglomerate net mark-up a little higher.

Matching skirts and pants (hot, that is), a takeoff on the tennis dress, and dress blazers were mentioned by several pros (or their wives) as items that most attracted their women customers.

Lesson business over-all was down at least 10 per cent, a casualty of the weather, but at clubs where the ranges weren't flooded, the volume was reported as good. Bag sales, which don't vary much from season to season, were about the same as they have been in the past. Gloves, headwear and miscellaneous items were down about the same percentage as balls.

It has to be kept in mind that most

pros don't keep close tabs on individual items in the early season, but give their estimates on the basis of total sales figures. However, all have a good top-of-the-head idea of what merchandise is selling well and what is lagging. In some cases, estimates of best selling brands are influenced to some degree by staff affiliation or where soft goods are involved, by the pro's preference for certain lines, but these probably aren't too important. At any rate, if a survey of 20 Chicago area pros doesn't tell the story for the whole country, it probably gives a good indication of the direction in which business is going.

As of the middle of June it was up! Two weeks of the best business many of the pros had ever experienced made them start forgetting the beating they had taken in the spring. All weren't convinced they would make a 100 per cent recovery for the season, but they were in a much better mood than they had been immediately prior to Memorial Day. There wasn't any doubt that there was a lot of business to be had if the weather only held so they could get to it. □

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Rain gear lead all other sales items this year with rain suit, umbrella and rain shoe sales up 50 per cent over last year. Most shops ran out of these items early in the season and neglected to reorder them in anticipation of some dry weather, which never came.

One pro reasoned that the jump in rain shoe sales resulted from upgrading the old crepe soles and generally better workmanship in the functional new \$28 rain shoes over the old \$19 variety. One Long Island pro sells these new shoes at two pair for \$50, a \$6 savings on a two-pair purchase, and says he's sold over 100 pair since March 1st. He added that his regular shoe sales were down by 30 per cent.

Professionals uniformly felt the new investment casting technique in clubhead design had been a great boost to golf club sales. "It's just a lot easier to sell clubs that have a new 'wrinkle' that members see. It can make a difference," says a North Carolina pro.

There was less enthusiasm for the

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JOBS OPEN

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graphite shafted clubs, which have engendered considerable controversy among pros and members. Many pros feel that the graphite won't really come into their own until they can be produced more cheaply. It seems that golf ball sales have equaled '72 figures or slightly better, due to the popularity of the Surlyn covers and new dimple configurations.

Bag sales were up in the South, but stayed about even with '72 sales or a bit lower in the New England area.

Ron Reiner at Muttontown G & CC bitterly lamented the 50 per cent nose dive in his over-all shop sales, but confessed optimism about '74. "I can't imagine '74 being as wet as this. I mean two wet years in a row must be unlikely." He complained that his men's soft goods were down and that women's soft good sales were pitiful.

A few pros say they suffered some grief over their buying methods on the color coordinated shirts and pants. "When I bought for '73 I forgot that many customers want only a pair of pants or a shirt without its matching counterpart. I found myself stuck with a bunch of shirts that had matched pants I'd already sold, but not the ones I had left in stock. Then when a member was after a shirt and pant combination, I couldn't match anything. Next year I'll buy colors that will go with anything in a pinch."

Pat Cici at Cedar Brook GC, was stung by the slow season, but says the Mill River Plan saved him from suffering as extensively as some of his fellow pros. Like many Eastern professionals, Cici listed rain gear as his biggest seller and says he just struggled to hold his own in the other areas.

Despite the general despondency among club professionals over the ruins of the '73 selling season, this is not the first year weather beaten pros have pulled under the lash of wind and water and, we have confidence that, as in other grim years, they will pull themselves up from their rain boot straps during the remainder of the season and attack the next year as though the last had been good training for the future. □