

SLOW PLAY STOPS PROFITS

Here are some startling dollars and cents facts on what slow play is costing golf facilities—at a time when they can least afford it. And some courses refuse to tolerate it

by DON CURLEE

Speeding up play has not become a crusade in the golf business yet, but an undercurrent among professionals, managers and course officials is gaining momentum. This is especially true in California where simple arithmetic proves the point. Because golf is mostly a year-round proposition there, multiplying the rounds sacrificed to slow play each weekend by 52 and affixing a dollar figure constitutes strong testimony for "moving them out."

One professional estimates that slow play costs the course \$100 on an average Saturday in green fees alone, to say nothing of sales in the shop. The lower rate of play is reflected in lower returns from golf car rentals and practice range income, as well as in the food and drink concessions.

Municipal and public play courses feel the impact of slow play most intensely, although private clubs are not immune. Appeal to a fickle public is the basis for success in a public play operation, whereas loyalty and investment often will cause

private club members to be more patient with the irritation of slow play. Of course, club members are likely to argue that they are more serious golfers (which may or may not cause them to play faster), with a lower percentage of beginners and hackers in their midst.

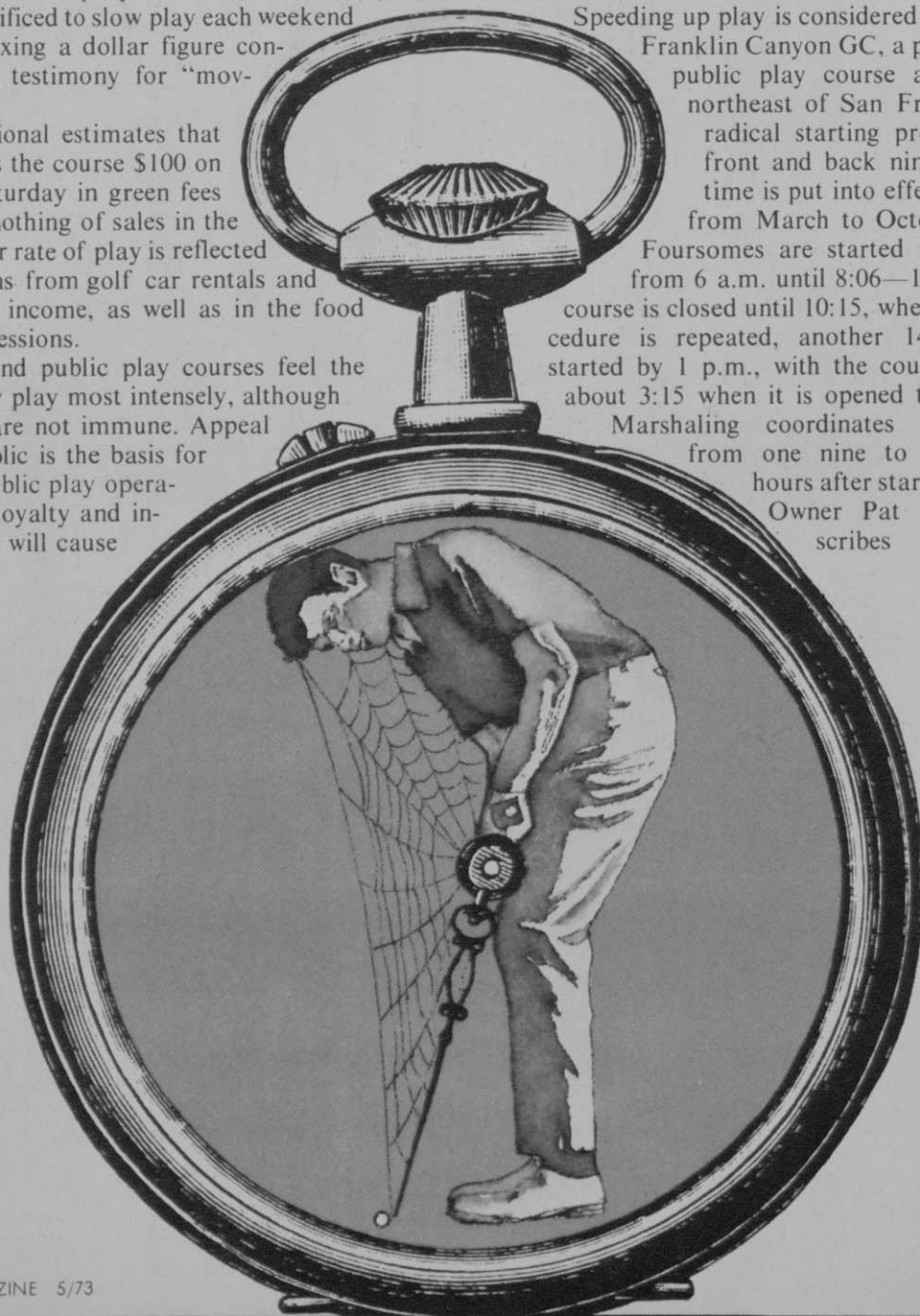
Speeding up play is considered so important at

Franklin Canyon GC, a privately owned, public play course about 25 miles northeast of San Francisco, that a radical starting procedure on the front and back nines at the same time is put into effect on weekends from March to October each year.

Foursomes are started front and back from 6 a.m. until 8:06—144 players. The course is closed until 10:15, when the same procedure is repeated, another 144 players are started by 1 p.m., with the course closed until about 3:15 when it is opened to regular play.

Marshaling coordinates the cross-over from one nine to the other two hours after starting.

Owner Pat Markovich describes the results.



"Knowing they must be back at the clubhouse in two hours puts a gentle pressure on our golfers that they seem to like—at least they respond well to it. Golfers don't want to spend five or six hours to play; they just seem to fall into the practice if something isn't done to encourage them. We think we've found the subtle persuader." This is the third year the system has been practiced.

Once the golfers are on their ways the professionals and staff members are free to spend adequate time with customers in the shop and in teaching. Regular players who come early for their starting times and drop-in customers appreciate the individual attention. Course management maintains a close communication with its men's club and other golfers in the area, so few are surprised or unnecessarily disappointed when the system is put into effect.

"The greatest evil of slow play is the loss of income," Markovich says. "Every seven minutes we save represents \$24 (four \$6 green fees). Our income has improved in the past two years because of our double shift starting system, and the average time for 18 holes has dropped from 5½ hours to just over four hours."

The example of the Los Angeles Recreation and Parks Department in its Go-Golf promotion two years ago gives further evidence that golfers want to play faster rounds and will respond when they are encouraged tactfully. Golf Director Ray Goates feels the experiment in offering prizes and public recognition to foursomes playing in 3½ hours or less has had a lasting effect. Rounds at the city's courses are completed regularly in about 4½ hours now, and golfers themselves are eliminating many of the former causes for slower rounds.

One of the lingering practices, which serves as a subtle reminder, is the posting of all lapsed times by foursomes at all city courses. Knowing they are being timed causes most golfers to eliminate many slow play habits. Distinctive plantings 150 yards from each green have been added at all city courses also to minimize the time required to compute yardage and select clubs.

Goates says, "We consider it a major accomplishment that we've reversed the trend toward longer rounds. It had us deeply concerned because we didn't see how we could accommodate the increasing number of people who want to play. Go-Golf with its gimmicks made an issue out of the need to play faster and helped prove to golfers they can play faster and better."

The 18 cups at the Rancho Park GC in Los Angeles have been equipped with automatic ball ejectors that toss balls back out of the cups three to six feet. Time saving is not as important here, from Goates' viewpoint, as the traffic around the cup. "It may allow us to change the cups every other day instead of every day," he says, a practical application.

Go-Golf has caused members of the men's and women's clubs at the courses in Los Angeles to continue to encourage faster play among themselves, through notices and editorial reminders in their

bulletins and by calling attention to the need and recognition for consistently faster players.

Knowing their golf clientele is the key to two other operations, which have made noteworthy progress in keeping play moving. One is the privately owned, public play Riverside GC near San Jose and the other is the Sacramento Parks and Recreation Department. Riverside has established a solid reputation for faster play. It is the home of the Four-Hour Club, a group golfers can join only if they prove they can complete a round in less than four hours. When strangers call for starting times, they are told it is the practice at Riverside to play in four hours or less. If they are beginners they usually admit it and take a later time.

"We find that most golfers want to play fast," says Harry Brown, co-manager at Riverside. "It's a matter of education with new players; they don't get enough information. I've found groups two holes behind the foursome ahead without realizing it. We try to spot the slow players very early in the round—by the third hole at the latest—and then inform them of the practice of playing rapidly."

Brown says he expects that golf cars will be required soon at Riverside for groups who tee off before 8 a.m., and tournaments are never accepted on Saturdays before 10:30—and then only if the group is known to play fast.

At one point Brown, with his brother, Bill, thought low handicappers were the faster players and restricted the early tee-off times on weekends to better players. They learned, however, that low scores and faster play are not synonymous, and they found that many of their regular high handicappers felt they were the victims of discrimination.

As GOLFDOM talked with Brown, he spread out the reservation sheet for the following weekend, pointing to those he knows can set a fast pace or at least keep up and to those who bear watching and marshaling. The Browns believe that granting preferred starting times to members of their Four-Hour Club is going to enhance the reputation Riverside has established for faster play.

In Sacramento Superintendent of Golf Dale Achondo says that slow play never has been a serious problem, but he knows why—his department continually works to correct it.

Reservations for weekend play are taken for the city's two 18-hole courses in person only at 6:30 a.m. Tuesdays at the Park and Recreation Department. Marshals from the two courses are in charge of sign-ups. They issue a receipt to each person in exchange for a \$1 reservation fee. The receipt must be presented by the person who received it at the golf course on Saturday to claim the starting time. He can't ask a relative to stand in line for him.

The two marshals, both good golfers and both in their jobs for long periods, know golfers well and they know their playing habits, fast or slow. Golfers, they find, are creatures of habit and like to take the same tee-off time each week. But when they get a newcomer in the early starters they know he bears

continued on page 18



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SLOW PLAY *from page 17*

watching to avoid falling off the pace. Although the marshals are respected for their own golfing abilities and knowledge, occasionally they encounter golfers who simply can't respond to their encouragement to play faster. In these cases the marshals invite them to play at a later time or during the week and give them a rain check.

"We lose revenue on repeat business if we allow the rate of play to slow down," Achondo explains. "Golfers in our area simply won't play courses where they must wait on every tee; they'll drive a few miles to a less crowded course. We have to keep things moving or lose our players."

The only complaints Achondo has received have been in the form of anonymous letters and phone calls. He always offers to make an appointment for the complainer with the offending marshal, but none has ever materialized. "When the marshals encounter the types who argue that they paid to play and will go at the speed they want, they explain that they are making 150 golfers behind them miserable, and that usually speeds things up."

Achondo is convinced that the age, experience and approach of his marshals are a key to the system, and recommends strongly against trying to duplicate it with young marshals. Older golfers don't cooperate well with young marshals.

The classic story about the stubborn I-paid-to-play syndrome involves the Carmel Valley GC near Carmel, a private course offering nonproprietary memberships. Several years ago when the course was new, President Ed Haber was having repeated confrontations with one particular member who regularly held up play. Haber's personal reminder to him at the turn one day brought a particularly indignant response, and even slower play on the back nine. Haber greeted him at the 18th green with a check for \$3,600, at that time the price of his membership.

The National Golf Foundation has been a consistent advocate of faster play. West Coast representative for the NGF Buddy Johnson explains, "We're going to find ourselves short of golf courses, so we

must make the best use of those we have." Current NGF emphasis is on design, working with the parks and recreation personnel in municipal set-ups and encouraging golf course architects to consider the speed of play as they design municipal and public play layouts. "We encourage them to design shorter courses with less hazards wherever possible—not Mickey Mouse courses—but grass bunkers substituted for sand in some areas, particularly the fairways," Johnson says.

Johnson also offered a credible diagnosis for the plague of slow play. "One reason is the great influx of golfers in the past 15 years. It has exceeded our ability to educate them in regard to etiquette. They take their instruction from television; it's their only source."

Johnson feels the Professional Golfers' Assn. and individual members probably are the large-scale solution to speeding up play through instruction, guidance and encouragement. Even the touring professionals have made slow play an issue on several occasions, and Johnson thinks it may come to some tournament rules someday—such as not walking ahead of the ball in the fairway, lining up a putt from one side of the hole only and official censure if a group falls as much as one hole behind the group ahead.

To make real progress every golf course must offer its own encouragement for its players to move along faster, and the professional is the key to it in most cases. The NGF appeals to the personal interests of professionals in business schools and at PGA section meetings, where it points out that additional players mean additional revenue and merchandise sales. Hopefully, this lesson won't be lost on professionals, who have the most to gain from implementing a faster play program at their respective clubs.

The NGF, golfers and golf management in Los Angeles, owners and players at several other western courses are getting the message that faster play benefits everyone. As more receive it, the undercurrent could become a groundswell. □