



Steve Garske, president of Par Aide Products, has a bright outlook for the accessory business.

Counter Measures

Accessory manufacturers respond to flat market with 'innovative,' 'quality' products

BY LARRY AYLWARD
EDITOR IN CHIEF

How wonderful it was to sell ball washers and flagsticks in the mid and late 1990s when golf courses were popping up across the country as fast as Wal-Marts. Accessory manufacturers couldn't produce their products fast enough to keep up with the swift clip in which golf courses were opening.

But, as the old song says, "those days are gone my friends." And accessory manufacturers have been forced to change with the times.

"It was awfully nice when 300 to 400 golf courses were opening every year," says John Kelly, president of Cedar Falls, Iowa-based Standard Golf Co. "That made us all look pretty good. But it's a little bit tougher now."

Last year only 124.5 golf courses (in 18-hole equivalents) opened, according to the National Golf Foundation. With 98 closures, the net addition was only 26.5 course openings. Compare that to 2000 when 398.5 golf courses opened.

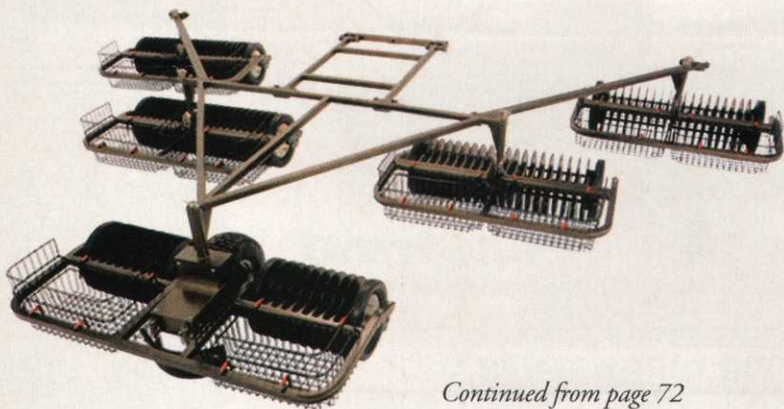
Kelly says he expected the downturn, which began shortly after Sept. 11, 2001. It was easy to see, what with the high number of new courses being built in accordance with the low number of new players coming into the game.

Also, with real-estate prices skyrocketing, Kelly wasn't surprised that some owners jumped at the chance to sell their courses to let them be converted into housing developments.

Steve Garske, president of Lino Lakes, Minn.-based Par Aide Products, says he

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Standard Golf's Magnum Harvester Ball Picker is billed as a product to save time and money.

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began telling people in the late 1990s that he expected golf course growth to decline significantly by 2000. He wasn't far off. But Garske says Par Aide's business has been steady despite the economic downturn.

"We haven't seen any huge downturns, but we haven't seen any huge increases either," he adds.

But Garske's outlook for the business is brighter than it has been in the last few years.

"This is the first spring in the last five years where I've heard a number of people

tell me they were going to buy new equipment," he said in May.

So, what's driving the resurgence? What's new and cool on the golf course accessory circuit? What are the products that manufacturers can't make fast enough?

Shirley Anderson, president of Winnipeg, Manitoba-based Bayco Golf, says recycled plastic products — such as rope, hazard and out-of-bounds stakes — are selling well.

"They're maintenance free, they don't warp, and you don't have to paint them," she says. Bayco's custom accessory business has also been strong, Anderson notes.

"Everybody wants embroidered flags, screen-printed flags and their courses' names printed on their ball washers," she adds.

Anderson believes the custom business

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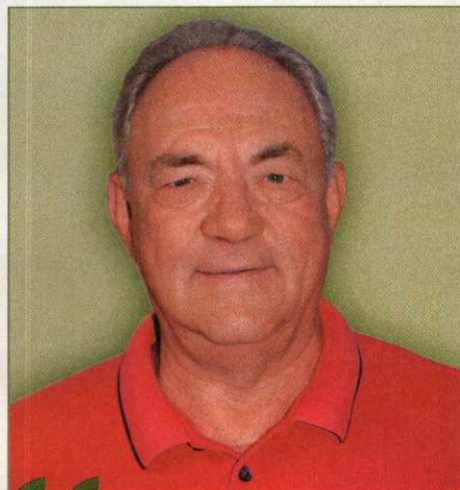
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PRESIDENT | STANDARD GOLF CO.



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SHIRLEY ANDERSON
PRESIDENT | BAYCO GOLF

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boom is because of increased competition among golf courses.

“[Courses] are trying to go the extra mile

to make sure their names are up front,” she says.

Anderson says her customers are also asking for different-colored accessories to brighten up their courses.

“Before it was just red and green,” she says. “Now they want navy blue and gray.”

Mark Hammer, national sales manager for Delafield, Wis.-based Great Lakes Golf Course Products, says water-related accessories are popular items, such as convenient huts and boxes to store water bottles.

“We build a lot of custom-shaped and custom-sized water bottle boxes and convenient huts,” he adds.

Great Lakes, in partnership with Halsey-Taylor, also offers a powerless water fountain. It taps into an existing water line on the course and delivers chilled water through copper tubing that runs through ice stored in the fountain’s infrastructure.

While the cost for the powerless water fountain initially may be more expensive than a box or convenience station, it will be cheaper in the long run because it uses municipal water, Hammer says. That way courses don’t have to keep buying and supplying bottled water.

Another popular new product offered by Great Lakes is a tee monument that combines storage, waste, a clock, signage, a course logo and a ball washer all in one.

Standard Golf recently added marking paint to its product line. The company has added additional lines of the paint, manufactured by Rustoleum, for use on parking lots.

Last year Standard Golf introduced its Magnum Harvester Ball Picker, a gang picker that can go forward and backward without tangling or damaging the gangs. Standard billed the product as an item that would “save golf professionals time and money when picking up their ranges.”

Par Aide recently introduced the Core Hog, a bracket that attaches to the front of a walk-behind mower and is used for core cleanup.

Timing is everything when it comes to releasing new products these days, Garske says. The same can be said of aggressive and



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innovative new product development, Kelly adds. To be the first company out with a needed and quality new product is the best way to get a leg up on the competition, Hammer notes.

Nobody wants to reveal top-secret information when it comes to new product development. But all will probably agree that solid product performance is imperative. Anderson says her customers desire quality products that provide many years of service.

"They don't want to have to buy any parts to replace anything," she says. "They want more bang for their bucks."

Of course, it's not all about what's new in the world of accessories. It's also about staying power.

Asked what Bayco can always count on to sell, Anderson doesn't hesitate about her reply.

"Ball washers," she says.

Kelly says Standard Golf's mainstay products are flagsticks, cups and bunker rakes.

"In terms of sheer numbers, it's hard to believe the number of cups, flagsticks and rakes we sell every year," he adds.

Regarding staying power, it's

Some tee monuments come with all of the fixings, including this one from Great Lakes Golf Course Products. The Solid Teak Tee Monument (below) has an engraved tee sign, a 6-inch weatherproof clock, a ball washer and a plank-style roof.



important to keep up with the trends in the accessory segment. While ball washers might have long lives, their colors might not.

The color of equipment often helps define the accessories market. For instance, brown was a popular color for accessories on the course in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Kelly points out.

"People thought that brown blended in nicely," he adds. "There were brown ball washers and brown benches. But [brown] peaked after three or four years and went out of style."

Green is the "in" color now, Kelly notes. "You have to keep on top of what seems to be popular."

There are also former mainstay products that have faded or are fading. Items like spike brushes are not selling as well as they were because so many courses have banned metal spikes, Garske says. The brushes just don't get torn up as much with soft spikes.

Anderson says she has noticed that courses aren't using as many big signs in an attempt to decrease clutter on golf courses.

"If courses do put out signs, they want small ones that aren't that obvious," Anderson says, noting that courses are taking a more subtle approach to conveying messages.

Hammer says demand for water-cooler enclosures is decreasing because more courses believe water bottle boxes are a safer way to offer a cool drink. Hammer also has noticed that more courses are painting more lines rather than using hazard markers. He wonders if courses are painting as part of a cost-cutting measure.

Kelly says it's common for Standard Golf to discontinue the sale of one or two items annually.

"Everything kind of runs its course," he says. "We have some tee markers that have been around for eons. But as long as there are reasonable amounts sold every year, we keep them in the line." ■

A vertical advertisement for Milorganite. At the top is a white golf ball with the Milorganite logo and the text "For Better Results. Naturally." Below the ball is the text "TURF TIP" in large, green, outlined letters. Underneath is a paragraph of text: "Have you been double cutting, double rolling all season long? Milorganite's slow release formula provides nitrogen over an 8 to 12 week period, minimizing the problems of excessive growth- which means less mowing for you!" At the bottom is another Milorganite logo with the same tagline, followed by the phone number "1-800-287-9645" and the website "www.milorganite.com". A small number "06-061-2" is at the very bottom.

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