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HOW ARE PROS FAIRING IN '72?

Rain wiped out pro shop sales in the Northeast; Midwestern shops fared only slightly better; sales volume increases reported at Western and Southern shops. Unanimous from all sections: discount and retail store competition stiffening

WEST by DON CURLEE

SAN FRANCISCO—Most golf operations in the West and in California are enjoying increased business over last year—not spectacular increases but significant percentages from 5 to 30.

Early spring weather here was perfect, with practically no rain on weekends. With irrigation and predictable weather and play, course conditions are as good as they have ever been, according to a number of professionals and players.

Municipal and public play courses generally reflect greater business increases, partially because of increased play, although private clubs with static memberships have recorded some substantial increases in business volumes.

One municipal course professional said that the use of his 40 cars has increased about 15 per cent since last year. The semi-hilly layout and this year's warmer weather have been major factors.

His club sales are up moderately, but he sees new interest building in clubs and is adding a fitting room with video tape adjacent to his office, because his driving range is a considerable distance from the golf shop. He believes his club sales have been held down by discounters in his area and he plans increased advertising and promotion.

continued

CENTRAL by JOE DOAN

CHICAGO—This season has been disappointing to professionals in the Midwest because with the very definite recovery in the economy, the professionals were counting on bringing in a bigger harvest. But for most, it hasn't worked out that way. Poor weather from mid-April until at least mid-June, when several weekends were rained out, and lagging women's business conspired to put a damper on sales.

Drainage plays an important part in determining how much golf is played in the first two months of the season. At many clubs, rain may knock out golf cars, but drainage is good enough for foot traffic.

Poor early season weather doesn't necessarily make serious inroads into what might be called the "capital equipment" sold to golfers. Clubs, shoes, bags and golfwear sales are relatively stable from year to year. Poor weather even brings bonus business in rainwear. But where the inclement weather hurts the professional is in ball and glove sales. If 200 golfers have to sit in the clubhouse and watch it rain for from four to seven weekends in the spring, think of all the sales of these two items that are lost. And they are never made up. That's what happened in the Chicago district this season, and right off it knocked out professionals' chances of possibly

continued

EAST by GERRY FINN

NEW YORK—Generally speaking these have been hairline fractured days of spring and summer for the men who depend on sales, lessons and golf car rentals to keep the proverbial wolf away from the door. And all because it has been one of the wettest first half seasons on record.

In most responses by the professionals surveyed the drop in revenue from golf car rentals has meant the difference between sensational upswings in profit and an over-all decline in that direction. Percentages of decreases in the amount of car rentals range from 15 per cent (on a course with unusually effective drainage) to 60 per cent (on a course where the terrain would be moist even if a drought emergency were declared). One exclusive club in the New York City area had an interesting show of percentages. Car rentals were down 20 per cent and the number of rounds likewise hit a 15 per cent downward trend with the membership rolls holding steady. In the sales action, equipment was off a whopping 22 per cent, balls up 5 per cent with soft goods coming to the rescue on a gain of 25 per cent over last year.

On the other hand, a club in Rhode Island, which would fall into the medium-income class, fought through the unpleasantness of a wet

continued

WEST

continued

Ball sales have been stronger this year, so good with one new design he hasn't been able to keep it in stock. He competes with discounters in shoe close-outs, but he cannot compete with apparel stores in nearby shopping centers for soft good sales and plans to de-emphasize this part of his merchandise.

Another professional at a public fee course says that an increase over 1971 sales of 15 to 17 per cent has convinced him to increase the size of his golf shop by 50 per cent. Installation of an automatic sprinkler irrigation system has kept his course in top condition.

He expects increased competition for all golf professionals, especially himself, because a store offering professional line equipment is scheduled to open a short distance from his course.

An increase in total volume of about 10 per cent was reported by another private club professional in spite of no increase in play; the club has 30 open memberships.

He said that balls and clubs both have accounted for notable increases in sales, with shoe sales up about 10 per cent, bags about steady and golf glove sales up solidly, because of lively interest in the Velcro fastener. In the year and a half he has been responsible for the golf shop, he has increased the inventory and credits this for some of his increased sales.

Another private club professional reported a volume increase of 15 per cent over the same period in 1971, the result of an additional assistant to allow closer attention to member needs and an expanded teaching program, which stimulates interest in equipment.

His soft goods sales increased when he bought a wider variety of articles, but less depth in each line. Men's slacks and wide-collar sports shirts were major sellers. Purchase of a blind-stitch sewing machine allows him to cuff trousers and deliver them promptly, often on the day of purchase.

Guest play has increased. This has given him opportunities to merchandise items the guests don't find in their home golf shops.

continued on page 28

CENTRAL

continued

having the best selling year they enjoyed since 1968

Less than half of the 20 professionals surveyed, said that they were happy with their women's volume. At Medinah CC, which has the showcase pro shop in the Midwest, sales to women were estimated to be up a solid 10 per cent. The usual items held steady; there was an increase of 15 per cent in knit shells. Cocktail gowns and jewelry were doing well. Professionals at seven or eight other clubs said their women's wear sales were about as high as they had been in the previous year. But thereafter it was downhill. At least two professionals are thinking seriously of discontinuing the women's apparel line in 1973. About half said they were planning to put it on sale, either the last week in July or the first week in August, two or three weeks earlier than in 1971.

There has been quite a switch in women's attitudes, according to four or five professionals. Five or six years ago, the female club members were beginning to emerge as better pro shop customers than their husbands. Now, it is felt that due to the recession they have been forced to economize and are not yet convinced that recovery is either on its way or has arrived.

Not only are women shopping elsewhere for apparel, but their buying of pro line and quality clubs has slipped in the last three years. In addition to this, a high percentage choose to buy cut-rate balls outside, even though the shop can match these balls in quality and price.

Here is a summary of the different items that make up the professional's volume:

Over-all sales: Up about 3 per cent over 1971 and certainly not more than 5 per cent;

Rounds played: Down about 5 per cent, due to the slow start. But four straight days of fine playing weather over the July 4th weekend closed or nearly closed the gap at several clubs;

Balls: Down possibly 5 per cent, but most professionals expect to make up the deficit by August 1. Unaccountably, professionals feel, the

continued on page 28

EAST

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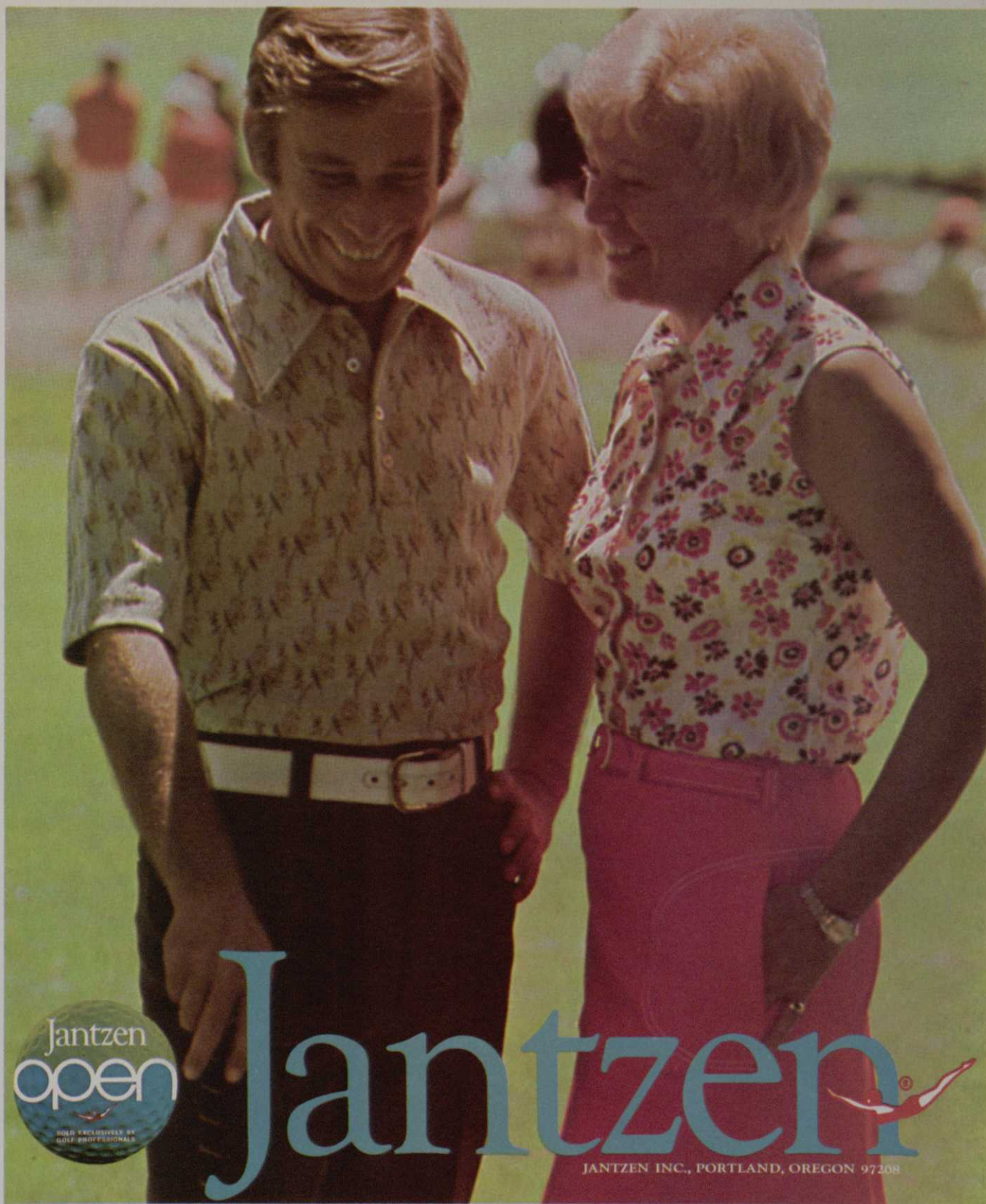
spring and early summer with the only decrease found in a falloff of 17 per cent in car rentals. In the pro shop, hard goods, balls and soft goods were all ringing away at a 15 per cent hike over 1971.

One professional, who operates the shop at a municipal course in a rather affluent Connecticut town, was just about ready to pack it in at the halfway mark of his accounting year. "I just had a long session with my accountant," he says. "I can't believe the figures myself. My sales are down 41 per cent from last year." The same professional has experienced a decline in sales of golf clubs. "I can remember when I had the biggest volume of any pro in the area. But, that's when I could sell a guy a set of irons and woods for \$150. This is a municipal course with public links players. They can't afford \$400. They're going to the discount houses for their clubs and there's nothing I can do about it."

Maybe a slight departure from this morbid state of affairs in the Northeast will help balance out the pro shop survey of the East Coast. The Southeast has been blessed by ideal weather during its playing season, but again golf equipment sales are down, although slightly. "When I say my equipment sales are down 15 per cent from last year (another bad year at his club)," says one Florida professional, "it really isn't an indication of the total picture. If you analyze my figures, our pro shop sales are up 20 per cent. All of this is in golf ball sales and soft goods. I have very little of my inventory tied up in clubs."

Another Florida professional, who operates one of the largest pro shops in Florida, claims he doesn't have a full set of clubs in his shop. Although this is an exaggeration, it underscores the merchandise trend at southern resorts. "Our customers are transients," says the resort professional. "They are just passing through. They won't buy a set of clubs for \$300, but they will spend the same amount on summer wear or cruise wear. Over 80 per cent of my shop is in leisure wear and golf balls."

continued on page 29



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300 SERIES Lightweight durable material / Indestructible bottom / Larger pockets for accessories / Wear resistant stitching / Roomy, hood and sweater pocket / Rugged ring cover / Umbrella holder / Snap-on hood / Large verticle zippered ball and accessory pocket / Wide range of colors. Suggested retail price \$30.00.

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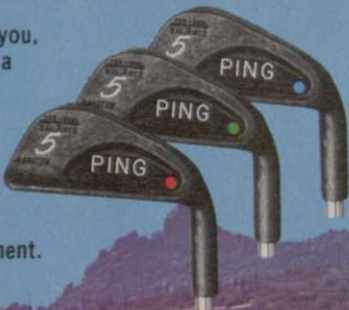
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Photo: Desert Forest Golf Club, Carefree, Arizona

WEST

from page 24

A professional at a semi-resort type public fee course finds that his heavy weekend tournament clientele doesn't lend itself to club sales. He estimates that 75 per cent of his play is turnover.

Sales of balls and soft goods, however, are good, and mass displays of shoes and other items stimulate impulse sales. Displays and merchandise can be left for longer periods because of customer turnover.

The over-all has amounted to an increase of from 15 to 20 per cent over 1971. He has sensed a distinct improvement in the economy and credited the near-perfect spring weather for building up play and customers at his 36-hole layout. □

CENTRAL

from page 24

non-cuts are not challenging the wound-ball volume. At least one professional is very annoyed because so many quality balls can be purchased around the Chicago area for \$11 a dozen. Another says that he has been harder hit than ever by all the cheap discount and premium balls that are floating around;

Men's golfwear: Praise be for doubleknits, which are more popular this year than last because there are more patterns from which to choose. Sales have to be up at least 10 per cent. Men's shirts always ride along with slacks—up 5 to 7 per cent;

Shoes and golf bags: Steady from year to year. Last year was a good bag year, but it's probably off a little in '72. Bags are an every-other or every-third year thing;

Clubs: Slightly better than even with 1971. Professionals are divided on the effect of marketing the new clubs early in the summer. Some say this stimulates sales; others vehemently contend it upsets their market because too many customers wait for new models. What messes up everyone is the slowness of delivery. Manufacturers concede that deliveries could be greatly improved, but they also say that the traditional fall introduction date for new models is passé. From now on, professionals can expect the new models to come out practically around the calendar. Production and delivery difficulties

will be straightened out within a year;

Lesson business: Up at least 5 and maybe 10 per cent. Poor weather doesn't restrict lesson giving to any great extent. Three professionals mentioned that members more and more are willing to take lessons from assistants and not the head professional. This loosens up the jam;

Costs: Staff salaries up in two out of three cases because professionals have holdover assistants who are entitled to merit increases. It's impossible to get away from paying some overtime because work schedules can't be juggled to avoid it. Professionals are also paying a 2.7 per cent Illinois State unemployment tax for the first time.

A check among the semi-private clubs shows that from a rounds played standpoint, they may be doing slightly better than the privates. By mid-July they generally had pulled up even with 1971, although play in May and early June was down an average of 10 per cent. One owner pointed out that semi-private clubs don't restrict players as much in rainy weather as do the private clubs. "We've to meet the installments on the mortgage, come rain or shine," he explains. "It costs a lot less to repair whatever damage is done than we'd lose if we didn't let them on." The trend of pro shop sales at fee clubs usually follows rounds played. □

EAST

from page 24

All of the professionals called in the Southeast had experienced increases in golf ball sales. "We keep hearing how discount stores are taking over the ball market," says one Georgia professional, "and I think some pros use this as an excuse when they don't sell balls. The fantastic amount of advertising by golf ball manufacturers has got the golfer coming in and asking for the ball for a trial. He's usually satisfied with its durability and distance and comes back again."

Meanwhile, back to the beleaguered Northeast.

Some professionals who have experienced hold-the-line status in sales, feel the credit goes solely to soft goods. "Even when it's raining out, a lot of the members come

around to the club," says one Maine professional. "Often they wind up in my shop and sometimes they buy a sweater or a pair of slacks just for something to do."

The dependency on soft goods is a strong trend that the golf professional finds himself joining, although some of the brethren are determined not to make clothing stores out of their pro shops.

"The only thing that has kept me above water (no pun intended) this year has been my foresight about soft goods," one proprietor of a New York area shop confides. "Before the season started I made sure

my soft goods lines were increased in every aspect. I even rearranged my pro shop to accommodate my increase in inventory. My over-all sales are up 15 per cent and the greatest part of that is soft goods. Besides, who sells a set of golf clubs in the rain? You sell slacks and sweaters . . . but no clubs."

Despite the soft goods revolution, the combination of car rental decreases and lesson drop offs certainly classifies 1972 as one of the disastrous money-making years for golf professionals.

"My lessons are down 30 per cent this season and there is nothing I

continued on page 31



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