

# THE UPS AND DOWNS OF GOLF CARS AS THE GAME GROWS

By National Golf Foundation, golf car division

The golf car today is not a just a matter of convenience. It also happens to be the biggest profit making item at most golf facilities throughout the country. How, why, and where this chain of events took place is a history lesson to the lasting effect of golf.

There are varying reports as to exactly when the first golf car drove onto the scene. Yet statistics show, during the 23 year period between 1931 and 1954, that the number of United States golf facilities declined from 5691 to 5076. Then in the 23 year period following, between 1955 and 1978, golf cars came into their own with golf facilities increasing in number from 5218 to 11,885. There is no question that the growth of golf holds a strong parallel to the largest period of growth for the golf car. With their availability and use, more and more golfers were able to play more rounds of golf!

Of course, first attempts at some type of golf cart or car came much before this surge of growth. Golfers since time began have thought of ways to make the course a little easier to cross. In the late twenties, oldsters at North Carolina's Biltmore Forest Country Club were using caddy-powered rickshaws to get in a round of golf. In England, there were cartoons depicting a type of "caddie car" with a boy pushing a trolley containing not only the golfer but a decanter of whiskey, a soda water siphon and two glasses—supposedly an example of the perfect way to face the course.

In 1930, a Curtis Willock was appointed Greens Committee Chairman at Annandale Golf Club in Pasadena, California. Willock had a wooden leg and was looking for ways to give more mobility to his

game. Gaining permission from the club to venture into the possibilities associated with using a vehicle for golf, Willock enlisted the help of Ben Delanty, then Manager of the Pasadena Power Department. Mr. Delanty, through a body shop in Pasadena, had a three wheel vehicle with an auto steering wheel made. Each rear wheel was driven by a motor powered by 12-volt batteries. There were two speeds, one in reverse, and a rack on the front for clubs. To Willock, this vehicle made his game. To the game, this vehicle was just the beginning of a new era in golf.

Growth was slow. After Willock's attempt at the first golf car,

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## Growth of golf parallels growth period for the golf cart

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the trend did not catch on until after the Second World War. Like Willock's the cars were built for golfers who had some sort of physical impairment and were not allowed on courses otherwise. Handicapped veterans in Palm Springs had specially built cars made for them in order to enjoy the game. In Kansas City, a Dr. R.A. Richardson took the basic design of a tricycle and invented a motorized cart in order to get in more rounds of golf despite a back ailment.

Meanwhile out in Long Beach, California, other men were experimenting with the invalid vehicle business too, never realizing where it might lead.

World War II brought on gas

rationing, but Merl Williams, then a tooling inspector at Douglas Aircraft Company in Long Beach, found a way to deal with the problem. He conceived the idea of building a small two-wheeled electric motorcycle with a single-wheeled trailer for his wife to get around town and do her shopping. During her shopping tours, many people stopped her to ask where she got her vehicle. As a result, Merl went to work building these vehicles in his garage and selling them to Long Beach residents. As his business grew, Merl had to leave his garage and join another man who had a small scooter sales business nearby—thus the Marketeer Company was born.

When the War was over, Merl and his wife decided to move home to Redlands, California. He and his partner separated, and in 1945 the Williams' brought *Marketeer Manufacturing Company to Redlands* (Merl's partner would continue to build electric vehicles under the name of Marketour until the early 1970's). They built electric invalid tricycles for the elderly and handicapped, and later branched out into industrial electric vehicles. During these years, Marketeer built special vehicles at the request of customers who needed a special design for a particular purpose.

One of their more "interesting" requests came in 1952 when a man asked Marketeer to build him a vehicle to ride around a golf course in. After a good laugh and of course filling the customer's order, Marketeer had built their first golf car and went on to become one of the largest manufacturers of golf cars in the world during the 50's and 60's. These first cars were three-wheeled with tiller steering and

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hand controlled speed and brake. They sat two passengers and there was room for golf clubs behind the seat.

While Marketeer was involved in the invalid car business, the Autoette Company also in Long Beach, was busy producing and converting the invalid cars into viable vehicles for golf. Though many of their sales were primarily to people in need of a car for health reasons, Autoette became very involved in redesigning the invalid

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### Golf car revenues have helped hold down greens fees and dues to members

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cars solely for golf and was one of the first companies to begin leasing small fleets.

In March of 1948, the first golf car to receive an official patent was the "Arthritis Special." Mr. R.J. Jackson, a Texas oilman, produced the particular model, which was displayed at courses throughout the United States. Comments ranged from ridiculous to wonderful, stupid to essential.

This was the beginning of serious entrants into the world of golf car manufacturing, yet acceptance of the car was still a major obstacle. The PGA and other groups were not so quick to take this "innovation" seriously and it was years before the golf car was readily accepted.

From the late 40's through the mid 50's, improvements on golf cars were made by trial and error. Since the need was not prevalent, research and development did not have the means to be supported and for the first several years almost all electric vehicles were built with little or no variation.

In 1955, advanced steps were taken. Twelve or fifteen manufacturers were now involved in the process. Clubs were more willing

to try a small fleet of cars, averaging 8-10 cars with many 2 and 4 car fleets, on their courses. The individual owner was no longer the only customer. Sales at this time ranged between 8,000 and 10,000 units annually. As the market began to grow, so did those interested in it. Bankers began to see a potential and offered leases to clubs and easy financing in order to try out this new movement.

Still, only one single golf car was manufactured under the PGA label during the first few years. This car was made by what was then known as the Victor Adding Machine Co. Popularity was growing, and with it manufacturing began to grow. It was a continuous in and out business. Some of the companies who came, went and stayed included Spartan Aircraft Co., Allis Chalmers, Sears Roebuck and Co., Westinghouse, AMF Par Pony, Wayne Golfmobile, Cushman, Caddy Car, Worthington Mardi Car, Turf Rider, Marketeer, Versal, Eshleman, Gross Givens, Westmont, Autoette, Atwood Terra Car, Westcoaster, Walker, Jato, Electric Caddy, and the list seems endless.

Even though companies came and went, the golf car maintained its climb to becoming a strong force in the game. More and more golf facilities were realizing what a strong profit maker the golf car could be for their club. Through the 1960's and 70's, sales continually and consistently increased.

In addition to the profit making factor, acceptance by the PGA also rested with the realization that the golf car was convenient—with proper utilization, they reduced playing time, thus more golfers could play. The golfer with limited time could now play a round of golf more quickly, and as was true in the beginning, people with health problems could more fully enjoy a round of golf. Adverse weather conditions could also be taken in stride when riding in a golf car. Every year, more and more people were learning to enjoy the game and the golf car helped bring this

impact about, keeping golf within reach of players from all walks of life. In 1957, 3,812,000 people averaged 17 rounds each. In 1980, 13,000,000 averaged 28 rounds each.

While convenience was a key factor, the fact that golf cars were and still are one of the most profitable entities at a golf facility was even more important. Without the golf car, many a golf course would either have to raise greens fees and dues tremendously or close down, and the number of privately owned daily fee courses would drastically decrease, as investors need return on capital too. Through this added income, golf facilities can afford more PGA professionals for teaching, better managers, lower greens fees and dues, and the opening of the facilities to more people. This perhaps is the most important point in the acceptance of golf cars.

What does the future have in store? The car itself is experiencing strides in efficiency just as the automotive industry. Electric and gas cars are lighter, more maintenance free and cost less per round to operate. Rider comfort and safety

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### The first golf cars were designed for the handicapped

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have been greatly improved. Cars for individuals now have stereo radios, drink coolers, as well as upgraded upholstery and paint jobs like deluxe Detroit automobiles. On the drawing boards are such innovations as solar powered golf cars.

Today, over 660,000 gas and electric cars are in operation and in 1981 golf car income was approximately \$1 1/4 billion.

When adding up the final score, the golf car has proven to be a winning factor in advancing the game of golf. Without it, that final drive would be a long one. **WTT**