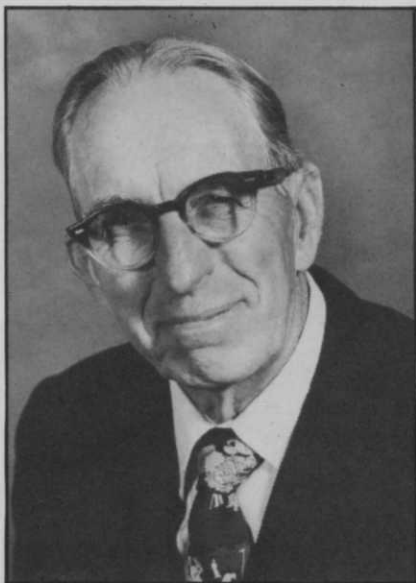


THE LITTLE GOLF COURSE

Smaller Courses May Hold Golf's Future

By BILL LYONS
The Lyon's Den, Canal Fulton, OH



Bill Lyons

The U.S. Government classifies a small business as one having fewer than 500 employees. With that in mind, the number of golf course operations topping that 500 figure could be counted on one's fingers.

Figures are hard to find on the dollar volume of business that the small courses do annually. For our purposes, we will say a "little" golf course is one doing less than \$250,000 a year gross. Perhaps it is a 9-hole, a short, executive style course, a par three or a regulation 18 or 27 hole course.

The Small Business Administration says that the 10.9 million small businesses in the USA averaged only 2.6 percent profit based on the latest figures to date. On a \$¼ million gross at 2.6 percent, that would equal \$6,500; not much net profit for the little golf course whose market value may be two to four times its gross.

The little golf course is usually a family operation of less than 500 acres. These often independent people are not prone to join an organization serving their mutual needs unless they can see some financial benefit. This was true of the Michigan Owners Association which had 70 members before it came up with an insurance program that saved each course member thousands of dollars each year.

Perhaps we should look at ourselves and ask why we are not an organized group. The NGF tried to bring us together but their programs are geared to the golf industry minus the little courses.

The GCSAA does not want us. After paying my dues for many years I was told by some of its members I was not welcome because I had opened a little course. They had no classification for an owner.

The PGA so far has nothing to offer the little courses. They have come up with no programs to date that will benefit the little course.

The 50 or more turf management schools have failed to teach sound business management. Our study of their products shows they would rather mow grass than push a pencil. Record-keeping takes thinking.

By conservatively observing, it appears ¼ of all golf courses are

"The little course is a tax-paying entity not a tax consumer."

little ones. They are a vital part of the golf industry. Their merchandising sales are falling off. Most now sell only the eye-catching items—balls, gloves, tees and caps.

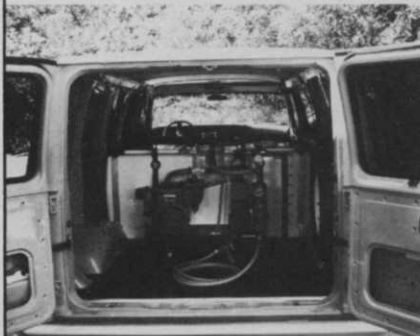
"Golf is a selective game," says Herb Graffis, "attracting selective people to it."

There is still some status to playing golf. The little course gives selective people in small communities a place to improve their status. Then, too, as Graffis says, "The little course helps make America beautiful."

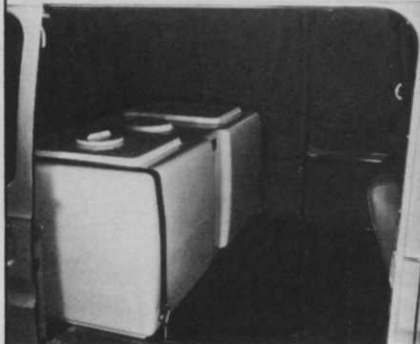
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SMALLER COURSES

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The little course is a tax-paying entity not a tax consumer. The course is overtaxed compared to adjoining farm property. Yet, it's been shown, it improves tax valuation of all housing within a five mile area.

There are 17 of these little

"Perhaps we should look at ourselves and ask why we are not an organized group."

courses in our area alone. Too many? There is one for each 18,000 in population. Yet, just because they are all so well manicured they still produce a livelihood for their owners.

What each course offers is different and unique. The little course cannot supply "high speed" turf that is advocated by the USGA and the pros for their tournaments. But the little courses do provide a pleasant setting for golfers to enjoy their sport year after year.

When Bob Toskie was in Cleveland this past fall, he said more small golf courses are needed for youth to grow on. Arnold Palmer was quoted in Golf Management magazine as saying, "Kids need a (little) golf course as accessible as a ball diamond." I agree with this, but who will make it free to them? It costs more to maintain one small putting green than several ball diamonds.

Many of the little courses are doing more than their bigger counterparts to promote junior golf. Many children who started playing the little courses 20 years ago are now country club members. Others, who have moved away, are playing on someone else's course.

Once I had the honor of addressing the Golf Course Architects Society on the little course subject. None of them took my suggestion to build "push-up" little courses with low maintenance costs. Maybe they felt it would be unethical. Yet, America needs that kind of course.

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SMALLER COURSES

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over 1,000 of our customers who played 10 or more nine holes with us the year before. If each of the 3,000 or more little courses served that many people, it would amount to a sizeable part of the golf industry.

Some of you many have lived through the "old" depression of the '30s and '40s when many courses, both big and little, closed. Play sold for 25 cents for 18 holes or 50 cents for all day. A family membership for a year could be had for four bags of fertilizer for the course. Even in those hard times, some 5,000 courses weathered the tide.

As the financial depression of the '80s worsens, golfers used to playing on large courses and paying exorbitant greens fees, will be looking to the little courses to play. A promising young executive living the good life as a family country club member suddenly joins the ranks of the unemployed. One of the first moves to economize is to cancel the country club membership. But give up golf? No. They will be using the smaller courses.

Can the little course survive the worst world-wide financial collapse in history? Wise managers say it can, but only after careful evaluation of the following points:

1. Reevaluate every employee from the front office to the garbage collector. Each has an important job to do efficiently.
2. Check those important records on a percentage basis of income to find the weak spots.
3. Evaluate maintenance practices with the goal of a healthier, more attractive turf. It wins customers.
4. Test sales programs. How can the weakest be improved? Thinking is hard work, but it can earn more money in the longrun.
5. Join golf owners associations for an exchange of ideas. Nobody has all the answers, but if you join your local association, you may learn some valuable things. James L. Holmes, now of Brian, TX, preached the following as a traveling agronomist with the USGA. "Charge more and you will get more customers." Our little course has done that for 20 years and it works.

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