

# Getting the Most Out of Golf Cars

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In the summer of 1971 the President's Council of the Metropolitan Golf Association, New York, decided that there was a serious lack of unbiased information on golf cars. The Council doesn't believe in the "collective wisdom of individual ignorance." This means that, regardless of the number of members on a committee, if the individual members don't know the subject and are not supplied with the correct information, they probably will come up with the wrong answer.

Since I was absent from this particular meeting, I was elected to do the research and write the *Golf Car Manual*. I have been told by a few people that the manual did for the golf car industry what Jack the Ripper did for door-to-door sales.

After doing a good deal of research, the manual was written and distributed by the Metropolitan Golf Association, (60 E. 42nd St., New York, N.Y.). There are, however, some conclusions which were drawn at the end of the manual. None of these conclusions have been proved wrong. (Probably since nobody ever considered it important enough to dispute the findings.) Some of them are thought-provoking and I would like to give them to you here.

1. Evidence shows that a club can do better financially if it owns its golf cars, rather than leases them.

2. Electric cars appear to be more advisable to purchase, unless they are precluded by terrain or necessary extensive use.

3. The successful operation of a golf car fleet is entirely dependent on good management and maintenance.

4. Evidence indicates that the newer three-wheel cars and four-wheel cars have about the same stability under most conditions. Therefore, since the three-wheel car is easier to maneuver and may require less shed space, as well as perhaps not creating as much compaction, it appears to be the wiser choice.

5. Car fees should not be lower than caddie fees.

6. Caddies should accompany golf cars.

There are several other conclusions, but the subject has more to do with the topics suggested by the six given above.

## CLUB OWNERSHIP BEST

Concerning the first conclusion, that a club

can do better owning its cars, the method of procurement is of vital importance. It is not uncommon for car revenue to be the largest non-dues revenue of the club. This is true even at clubs where the car operation is not efficiently run. Cars have the distinction of being one of the conveniences a member can enjoy that doesn't draw from dues income. In some clubs it's the only one. The pool; it costs more than it brings in; the same is true of tennis courts, and for many clubs the restaurant results in a cost in dues. Golf cars are one of the few revenue producers.

The conclusion that it is better to own cars is true because it reduces the costs of middlemen to own them. Rentals mean that someone else puts up the money so the club doesn't have to do it. Relieving the club of the burden of putting up the money or credit to purchase the cars could be very expensive. The finance costs are passed through the club anyway, but this time they have someone's profit added on top.

The argument that rentals avoid maintenance is just paying top dollar for avoiding a simple responsibility. Like so many "easy ways" it usually turns out to be the expensive way. Avoiding the first year repairs to cars nets nothing, since the cars are under a warranty the first year after purchase. It is during this first year when a club should be training its maintenance personnel, when dealers' service calls are being made.

Today there are even deals where the cars can be rented for a period of four or five years, while the rentals apply to the purchase price. This is a nice arrangement since the lease can be without any service, saving charges, while at the same time the car purchase is being done without straining the club's borrowing power. The dealer likes it because he can get the investment credit and depreciation on the cars.

Rather than get tied up on the financing of cars, let me say that the clubs who purchase do better. A club in Westchester County, N.Y., has just completed its first year of ownership after a history of leasing cars. The members are very happy with the change.

## ELECTRIC VS. GAS

The second conclusion drawn at the end of the manual was that electric cars appear to be the better purchase. This ties in very closely



*An experimental monorail  
golf car. No wheels on the  
turf!*

with the third conclusion that the successful golf car operation is dependent upon good management and good maintenance. The two items are really adding up to the most important quality your car fleet can have—longevity. Buying the cars the proper way is important. It's also very easy to understand. Longevity is different. Acquiring this virtue is more than a wise selection of type of car, dealer and method of finance. Once these things are done, the project is over. Extra years of car life represent gravy, income without procurement costs. Your fleet should and will last from 10 to 12 years if longevity is sought. Building longevity is more difficult because it has to be done over a period of time. It takes understanding the problem for what it is. About 60 per cent mechanical and 40 per cent political.

Electric cars are simpler than gasoline machines. They have fewer moving parts and the number of things that can cause breakdowns is far fewer than in the gasoline-powered vehicle.

The common thing about almost all golf car breakdowns is that they make the member believe that the cars are worn out and need replacing. This feeling among the members is extremely dangerous. Being forced to replace your car fleet is a serious blow to the profitability of your fleet operations. I needn't tell you there are few things more aggravating than a breakdown on the course. A breakdown can change a mild, agreeable member into a crusader for a fleet renewal.

Very few people outside of the industry can tell a 1967 car from a 1972 car. There are several reasons for this. The manufacturers make very few changes in car design, and people just don't care so long as the car does its job. It is to this end that maintenance programs must be geared. The other part of protecting the fleet after breakdown avoidance is in the image your cars present. Ash trays should be emptied, floors swept or blown off and the score card holder must be replaced if it breaks.



*Electric cars are simpler than gasoline machines.*

Rattles must be tested for and eliminated. Seat cushions should be recovered when they are ripped. A good cleaning with Fantastic or other modern cleaner weekly will do wonders to keep up the appearance of the fleet.

#### **GOOD MAINTENANCE**

Golf car parts are made by the automobile industry. Differentials, axles, drive shafts, armatures, windings, brake linings and drums are all automobile parts. These parts last in automobiles for thousands of miles. Golf cars in this area average about eleven miles a day on busy courses. Assuming six days a week for seven months for ten years is only 20,000 miles. This 20,000 miles is done at low speeds over grass, really not too much of a strain for auto parts. These auto parts constitute the major cost of a golf car. The other parts, relays, brushes for the electric motors and tires are the parts that must be replaced occasionally, but their cost is not substantial. Replacing golf cars due to the failure of relays, or because the brake or accelerator pedal sticks is like replacing your car because the ash tray is full.<sup>46</sup>

We talked before of the disastrous effects of breakdowns. When operating electric cars the principal cause of breakdown while on the course is battery failure. Battery failure is closely followed by "last gasp" operations of dying batteries on the final holes. When the last few holes start to look like the road to El Alamein, with the dead golf cars on each side of the fairway, you have waited too long. You have let your batteries run down and members' tempers run up. This stretching of the batteries may result in a shortened life for the cars themselves.

Two quick rules that can save a great many of these problems, as well as allowing you to cover for a less than perfect battery maintenance program are as follows:

A. Renew the battery every two years. Don't try to make them last an additional year. Almost always you will be caught.

B. Establish a program where cars get even use. Don't let the low numbered, odd numbered, old cars or any other group do most of the work. Each car should get the same number of rounds each week. It is important.

Recent developments in the battery industry offer new, higher capacity batteries for rougher terrain courses. Some that could not consider electric cars a few years ago have them now.

#### **3 WHEEL VS 4 WHEEL**

The fourth conclusion was that three-wheel cars are not a great deal less stable than four-wheel cars and coupled with other advantages they should not be discounted on the basis of a great additional risk of personal injury. This statement always draws some comment from any group. Perhaps a quick explanation is in order; then some of the advantages of the three wheel machine.

Almost every golf car has the clubs on the back; the power unit is usually just forward of the rear axle; the batteries are over and just forward of the rear axle; and the weight of the passengers is principally behind the center of the car. This means that the center of gravity of the car is not very far forward of the rear axle. In order for the car to capsize, the center of gravity must move to a line outside the axle. The front axle has little to do with the stability of the car except when the force is for the car





*A three-wheel car with the seat showing the batteries position.*

to tip to one of the front corners. Many car accidents seem now to be ones of drastic steering or gross negligence on the part of the operator. It is for this reason that tiller bar steering should be discouraged on three wheel cars. As with automobiles, it is difficult to build in protection against operator malfeasance.

The three-wheel can be steered in a much tighter turning radius, requiring less shed space for storage. It has 25 per cent less tire trouble and maybe even better than that. With one tire on the front, it is impossible for the front wheels to get out of line, which creates wear on the tires and on the golf course. The mechanism for steering the single front wheel is less complicated and much less susceptible to mechanical problems.

As explained before, there is little weight on the front wheels of a golf car anyway, so that spreading this reduced weight over two tires instead of one is of little consequence from a straight compaction standpoint. There are those who feel that making three tracks rather than two is better. I think the three track is better since compaction is not the killer that fatigue is. Two tires over a blade of grass is more killing than one regardless of weight.

#### **CAR FEES & CADDIES**

The last two conclusions are that car fees should not be less than caddy fees and that caddies should accompany cars. It would be wrong to displace caddies just because many people would prefer to save money on a round of golf. I also think it is wrong to gouge those who use the cars. It must be remembered that there are a percentage of people who don't have a choice, they must use a car. The reason may

be medical or matrimonial. (He has to play with his wife.)

Perhaps a mid road approach could be used. Pricing members out of clubs by making golf too expensive would be too bad. These people, usually older, need the club and in these days of no waiting lists, we must say that the club needs them. Some sort of program should be investigated to require a caddy but at some reduced rate. Caddies to find golf balls and reduce waiting for trap raking and the like make their use practical. Keep in mind that the caddies' greatest contribution is the speeding of play. Perhaps "B" or apprentice caddies could perform this function at a reasonable cost.

Now let's talk about getting the most out of your golf cars. Like any business enterprise you must obtain your capital assets in the most economical manner possible. We discussed this and recommended procurement by purchase, thereby cutting the initial cost to the minimum amount. Keeping the cars operational for as long a period as possible will cut the per year acquisition cost substantially.

#### **INCOME**

After having reduced these direct expenses as much as possible, we then have to discuss the other area of profit contribution—income. Use of the golf cars should be encouraged. Revenue from cars will be helpful in the overall operation of the club and could represent an increased incentive to membership. Suppose that a discount were offered on car use after five in the evening? Perhaps it would encourage members to come out and play nine holes on summer evenings. Normally the cars would be

producing no income, but such a plan might generate a fair revenue from the otherwise idle cars. Tying this program in with an informal buffet supper may encourage couples to participate. Giving members additional opportunity to play golf may make the difference between keeping him and losing him. A program like this could substantially lower the cost-per-hole-played for the suddenly pressed member. How many resignations have we seen where the member states that he can't get to use the club enough to justify membership. The resignation justified by statements like "my resignation will open the membership for someone better able to use the facilities" are passe. Today there is no member waiting list to use the facilities.

The question is often presented that the cars do more damage than they could ever justify. Can this income compensate for the bare places on the course, the paved paths just where a ball might land?

There are several answers to this question. The first is that clubs may not be able to afford not to have the cars. Many prospective members can't play without them. The other answer is that the damage factor is not as great as it is made out to be if properly controlled.

The first two answers, they attract members and supply income, are not to be turned aside in these times by the average club. Today the principal thrust is income. Memberships, golf cars or anywhere else it can be generated is welcome and to be encouraged.

The third answer, that the damage isn't all that great anyway, is controversial; but looking at the facts brings the problem into better focus.

There are few courses today that don't have at least one, and probably more, golf cars and variations of golf cars running around the course now. They are carrying men and equipment from place to place. Triplex mowers are a good deal heavier than a golf car. Fairway mowers apply more weight per square inch where they bear on the ground than golf cars do when fully loaded. Based on this, although compaction is a problem, golf cars are not the only causes of it. It would even be safe to say that the major contribution of golf cars to compaction is not so much their weight, but the volume of traffic.

#### **LIVING WITH ABUSES**

In most cases, the most flagrant abuses of the course with car operations are the result of either thoughtlessness or ignorance. Stop to think. How many golfers would take a divot out of a putting green? Very few, and when they did, they would be embarrassed and do immediate repair work. The same applies to damage caused by golf cars. If their drivers knew better, they wouldn't do the damage.

Cars operated by those as knowledgeable as members of the maintenance staff don't cause much damage.

The problem is really a matter of education of members and reminders for continued care. Take a simple one. At the beginning of the year, lines of chalk should be put down 30 feet from greens. This is a common rule "don't bring the cars closer than 30 feet from the green." The problem is that many people can't judge thirty feet very well. The lines will show the proper distance. When the lines disappear at the end of a week or so the lesson will have been taught and the replacement of the line will not be needed for the rest of the season. If you see that people are forgetting, put the line out again. Lines in specific areas where you don't want cars should either be chalked off or chained off. Remember that too many chains create a problem for the maintenance crew. A good permanent marker is a bush or a tree to break up traffic or block a bad area.

Areas that restrict traffic should have paved paths. These spots will be bare anyway, so try to restrict the traffic to the path and save as much square footage of grass as possible. Paths, with curbs, should be provided on all severe up and down grades. Paths up steep grades make it easier on the cars, and if curbs keep the car from leaving the path, cars will not be tipping over trying to go sideways on too steep an embankment. Signs on these hills stating that path must be used are helpful, but not as helpful as chains preventing cross country travel in these areas.

My feelings about restricting cars to the rough are mixed. If the course is not soggy from rain or not wilting from excessive heat, I think the traffic would do less damage when spread over the entire golf course. It will definitely speed up play. All car traffic in the rough means that the areas just adjacent to the fairway will soon be bare, or worse, yet, paved. A shot three feet off the fairway may bounce off a paved path and go out of bounds, while a shot 15 feet off will be in lush rough. It seems unfair to me.

#### **HERE TO STAY**

Cars are with us today. They are as much a part of the golf course scene as the tractor, the triplex mower, and the drain grate. None of these things is pretty, but as times change these things become imperative, along with their unpleasant side effects. Before restricting them from proper use, we should do a serious job of weighing the advantages and disadvantages. The desires of the majority of your members should be considered. Members are the key to club survival. Some of them bring problems with them. Those in club administration cannot, in these times, run roughshod over them.