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Rawhide rolls on recycling golf balls

Tabitha Waggoner, Princeton Daily Clarion

FORT BRANCH—Mark Schmitt is not a golfer, but he makes his living through the game.

Schmitt began diving for old golf balls as a teenager when working at his father's dry cleaning business no longer held an appeal for him.

"The reward was, at the time, what would take me all week at minimum wage, I could get in one afternoon," he remembered.

Although he earned a petroleum geology degree and worked with other businesses through the years, Schmitt finally decided he wanted to be self-employed.

"Everything I got into was not stable enough because it was beyond my control," he said.

Since 1993 he's been self-employed with [Rawhide Golf Ball Co.](#) He started small, with an old ringer washer for golf balls, and later got a hand crank machine to paint them. He put his business in a garage, and then a basement. Sometimes Schmitt would wake his wife in the middle of the night with the sound of golf balls being washed. The name "Rawhide" comes from the old western series with the same name.

"Self-employment has its advantages and disadvantages," he said. As the business became more successful, Schmitt hired employees. Eventually, Schmitt bought his father-in-law's old hog business buildings for use as a processing center, storage and main headquarters.

Today, he has three full-time employees, a part-time employee and two tractor operators. He still needs more employees, especially someone who can lift 30-60 pounds without trouble. They started working within a 50 mile radius and now they've branched out across state lines.

Retrieving 3,000 golf balls in one afternoon would make him \$150 in the late 1970s. But now, thanks to Schmitt's homemade inventions, he can do that several times over.

For example, by using two tractors with wenchers, rollers, and two 1,000 foot cables on each wench, rolling golf balls out of the water is made simple. The operators simply have to connect the cables to a roller, (Schmitt likes to sing the "rollin', rollin', rollin'" "Rawhide" theme song as they roll) and then pull the roller to either side of the lake, then use a six-prong shucker to pull the balls off the roller after bringing it back to the surface.

Golf balls aren't all they get. The roller sometimes pulls up "anything that's the same size as a golf ball." So that means rocks, some fish, clams and turtles.

"Then you really have to watch because (the turtles) get mad and are snapping, they're ready to bite the first thing they come in contact with," Schmitt said wryly.

Liner ponds are his favorite kind for diving, because all the balls slide to the same area and are easier to retrieve. Schmitt doesn't like the balls to be in the lake more than one or two years, because their clearcoat can get damaged and blistered.

Schmitt, who never seems to have a free moment during golf season, takes a phone call from the Evansville Country Club.

"They're dive-only," he explained. "There are too many pipes, cables."

When diving, results are best around the edges of the lake, "but they're lousy in the middle of the lake where it's pitch black," he said.

That's where Schmitt must do the "Braille method," where the diver feels around in a sweeping method at the bottom of the lake. "You feel twigs, rocks, fish, turtles, snakes and golf balls," he said. "If you can see 10 balls there's going to be 100 you can't see."

"I always target to get at least 6,000," he said. "15,000 ball days are not that uncommon. Tractors commonly get that."

Usually when he dives he gets 4,000 to 7,000 balls, but his biggest haul as a diver is 18,000 golf balls in a day.

"It was fun, it was very tiring but very fun," Schmitt said.

But how does he decide how much to sell them for?

"What that ball is worth is up to the player," he said.

Generally, Pro V1x balls are most expensive on an A to D grading. Schmitt has noticed trends in the Midwest compared to the East or West Coasts when it comes to golfers' use of the Pro V1. The Midwest is more conservative in its use of the Pro V1 near water than the coasts are, he said, which means there's a limit on how many he can sell.

"Rounds are down," he said, "money is tight, the economy has taken a hit."

How many retrieved balls are good enough to go back to the player? Only 40-50 percent are good for A, B, C, or D grading, Schmitt said.

Only 7 percent of all balls they get are Pro V1x, he said.

"We can't expand on that," he said. But on the coasts, about 70 percent of those balls can go back to the players.

"We're at the mercy of what Pro V1x come out of the lake," he said. Sometimes when it gets busy, they run low on stock of the popular ball.

But there are plenty of other brands the store offers, such as Titleist, Callaway, Nike and Precept.

And Schmitt has another plan to grow Rawhide Golf Ball Co.—expand the overseas market.
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