

Errant Golf Balls: Who is at risk?

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“Let us not look back in anger, or forward with fear, but around in awareness.”

James Thurber

When I receive the same question from different sides of the country, I realize that many others are probably considering the same topic. The question is: “Does the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) require golf course employees to wear hard hats?”

Before answering the question allow me to pose another: Do hard hats negate being injured by a golf ball?

BACKGROUND

Protective headgear has been around since the 3rd millennium BC and was originally used to protect from the blows of a mace. Over the ensuing years, protective headgear has been used for all types of protection from swords, arrows, low velocity bullets and shrapnel. Now helmets are available for everyone from bicyclists, racecar drivers, miners, firemen, construction workers and the armed forces to professional athletes.

An unrelated fact uncovered while researching this article was: since mandatory helmet laws for bicyclists have been imposed that bicycle head injuries have actually increased! (Of course, don't tell that to your kids.)

HUMAN NATURE

It is a fact that all golfers who attempt to improve their game spend time on the driving range. Have you been at the range when the unfortunate soul driving the special cart is cleaning up the golf balls? Have you ever thought about or intentionally aimed at the moving cart? After all the driver is in a protective cage and can't be hurt. Right? I will venture to say that most of us have aimed at least one ball at the cart!

A survey of golfers by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) listed the top golfer's complaints: #1 was aeration followed closely by “seeing workers on the course.”

We all want to enjoy our leisure time and want to do it as expeditiously as possible. An employee cutting fairways, greens, tees or the rough seems to slow us down; yet the maintenance on our favorite course is what keeps us coming back.

THE GOLF COURSE EMPLOYEE

The ground's crew typical starting time during peak season is dawn. Starting times during tournaments can be pre-dawn which (in my opinion) is very early. (I even know of one course that has had their employees cut the greens by headlights to get their employees off the course before play commenced!) More often than not, the employee's workday is over by 2 or 3 PM. If these are their working times, how is it likely that we are complaining about their presence? Of course, we take our pleasure when we can and sometimes the employees are still around.

Now that we know when the employees are around what are the considerations for protection? If hard hats are already in use at your operation, are the proper types of hard hats offered?

The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) provides guidelines for the 3 types of OSHA approved hard hats that should be used:

- Class A - General Service, limited voltage protection, and is intended for protection against impact hazards.
- Class B - Utility Service, high voltage helmets, are intended for protection against falling or flying objects and high voltage shocks and burns.
- Class C - Special Service, no voltage protection, is used for protection against minimal impacts.

Cost is always a factor when purchasing safety equipment. Buying equipment that does not meet ANSI and thereby OSHA standards is the **same** as not wearing any equipment. Another factor is comfort. If the equipment does not fit or makes the employee susceptible to heat stroke, why add another safety concern into the mix?

HARD HATS FOR GOLF COURSE EMPLOYEES

Are they needed? Does OSHA require them? Or if they are not required, where have the edicts to wear protective headgear come from? More often than not, your insurance company has made the recommendation that employees wear them.

Federal OSHA standards mandate employees wear protective headgear when working in areas where there is a potential for injury from falling objects. Federal OSHA standards do not specifically address golf course concerns for falling

objects. (Note: 26 states operate their own State OSHA programs and may have more stringent requirements.)

Are golf course employees subject to falling objects? For most shots, a golf ball is a projectile. The only time it is a falling object is when it is a flop shot or a wedge into the green and we all know the safest place to be is next to the pin since very few shots land there!

Another concern is the question of how much protection does a hard hat offer? It may protect the top of the head, yet what about the face and the rest of the body? Worker's compensation laws cover the majority of costs for employee injuries; yet considering our litigious society, is there the possibility of a lawsuit against the club, the club's decision makers or insurance company for mandating equipment that inadequately protect an employee?

I believe that hard hats convey a false sense of security. Not for the employee, but for the golfer. An employee wearing a hard hat looks protected to every golfer. If the employee is not wearing a hard hat, the golfer is more than likely to err on the side of safety and not hit when he/she thinks the employee is unaware of their presence. Yelling "FORE" may not be enough to alert the employee to the rapidly approaching projectile as the employee may have equipment noise or hearing protection that negates the warning.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Encourage your membership to be more aware of the employees and your superintendent to make the employees more alert to the golfers. No one wants to be hit by a golf ball. And as I have been told, there is nothing like the sound of the dimples on a golf ball screeching by your ear!

For this article, I attempted to obtain data from several sources including various insurance companies; yet could only obtain pertinent information from the Club Managers Association of America, United States Golf Association, GSCAA and OSHA.

It seems the insurance companies don't track errant golf ball injuries. I was even informed by one insurance source that the recommendation to wear hard hats is based on "antidotal evidence." If the data is so insignificant that it isn't tracked, then ask your carrier to show you the empirical data upon which they made the recommendation that you purchase this additional equipment and then force your employees to wear!

Alan E. Achatz, CCM, CHE is a former club manager who now assists clubs and CMAA chapters with OSHA education programs and OSHA policy development. Additionally, he is an instructor of the NRA Education Foundation ServSafe® Essentials course. He may be reached at www.ClubSafetySolutions.com