

North Carolina

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at State's Best New Course

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Stop Thief!

Leaving your bag outside while going to the snack bar may be the most expensive beer you'll ever buy

STEVE Arrington has seen it so often that he can almost discern the agitated look on the customer's face. On average, it happens about once a week. That's how frequently Arrington, manager of a Carolina Custom Golf store in Raleigh, comes across one of his sales staff helping a customer with a new set of clubs after theirs have been stolen.

"Once a week is only how many cases (of stolen clubs) I know about," says Arrington. "We've got six or seven sales people, so I don't hear about all of them."

Theft of golf equipment is a big, dark business. A spokesman for Insurer's World, an insurance replacement service based in Canton, Mass., estimates that the replacement value of stolen golf

BY PATRICK JONES

clubs approaches \$120 million a year.

It's no surprise that stick swindlers proliferate considering that many golfers paid more for their clubs than for their spouse's wedding ring — then leave these major graphite- and steel-shafted investments unattended around clubhouses, in their cars and garages. Stolen clubs can be quickly and profitably sold — no questions asked — at pawnshops and, particularly in these digital days, faceless over the Internet.

With a new set of top-of-the-line woods, irons and a putter easily costing \$3,000, it's understandable that many

crooks now prefer stealing golf clubs over shoplifting at Belk's. Oh, and did we mention that many golfers routinely leave in their bags: a wallet, watch, car keys, cell phone, beeper, PDA, class ring, prescription Ray-Bans and discount golf coupons.

Don't think it could happen to you? Think again.

In Pinehurst, a couple soliciting door to door in a gated community was arrested on charges of stealing golf clubs and later selling them to golf goods stores elsewhere in the state. They were finally nabbed in Hendersonville. The woman distracted people with her sales pitch at the front door, while the man took the clubs (and anything else he could nab) from the garage and loaded them into their van.

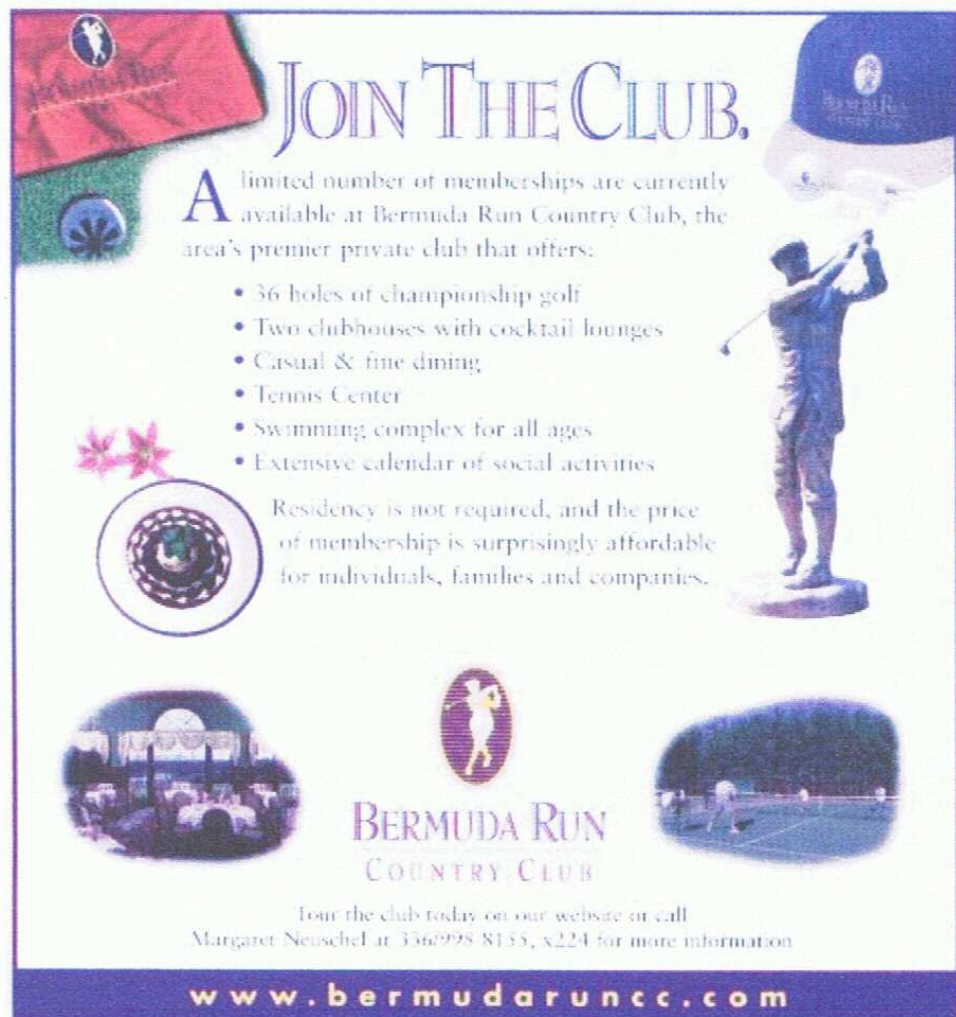
So, what can you do to prevent your clubs from being stolen? First, never, ever leave them unattended at the course. Leaving your bag outside while stepping inside to the snack bar may turn out to be the most expensive Budweiser you'll ever buy.

"The absolute best advice I can give golfers is to keep an eye on your clubs at all times," says Daryl Bender, a detective with the Pinehurst Police Department. "Always have someone stay with your cart and clubs and be aware of what's going on around you."

The Sandhills has one of the highest rates of golf courses per capita in the country, so it's no surprise that club theft is one of the community's most prevalent crimes. Bender estimates that he handles a dozen stolen club cases each month during the peak golfing season.

Here's another tip: Don't advertise that you own expensive clubs with look-at-what-I've-got headcovers. If you play with priceless woods inherited from Eli Callaway's personal collection, consider concealing them with no-name head covers from Wal-Mart.

"With expensive woods these days, it's a good idea to keep generic headcovers on them so nobody knows what's underneath if they happen to be walking by."



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What thief wouldn't be tempted by unattended bags boasting name-brand clubs and bulging with expensive boy-toys.

says Gary Otto, the first assistant professional at Devils Ridge Golf Club in Holly Springs. "Same goes with putters. A Scotty Cameron can cost \$250. That's

another club in your bag you might want to disguise."

If you are ripped off despite your best diligence, there are several steps you need

to take. First, file a report with the local police department. Next, consult your insurance carrier to see if the equipment is covered by your homeowner's policy.

Phil Oughton, who spent time as a special claims representative for Farmers Insurance Group while based in Garner, says club theft proved to be "a very big problem" in his first six months handling claims in eastern North Carolina. He estimates he processed a dozen cases in that span, including three bags stolen out of the same vehicle in Wrightsville Beach. One of the bags was recovered when the thief, apparently overburdened by the booty, dropped it in a nearby field.

The rescued clubs proved to be a first for Oughton. In 10 years of handling claims in Arizona before spending time in North Carolina, he says it was the first case in which stolen clubs were returned.

When filing a claim, Oughton says there is "no dollar limit" on golf clubs in homeowner's policies. "Even if you have a \$15,000 set of Yonex clubs stolen, we're going to pay you for it (minus deductible and depreciation). Of course, if you had a \$15,000 set of clubs, I would want a little proof." **NC**



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