

“The flow of courses is about rhythm, balance and sequence. A routing plan must give careful attention to each

Pace of Play | Bill Yates

# Manage by design

How can a spectacularly designed course with impeccable conditioning produce an indifferent or even a bad playing experience?

‘It took forever to play; we had to wait on every shot,’ players grumble as they hurry from the eighteenth green to the parking lot and then to the exit gate, checking their watches. Will these players ever return? Maybe. But an opportunity to gain loyal customers has certainly been missed.

There’s a natural tension that exists in the relationship between golf course architecture and golf course management. The origin of that tension is the fact that the golf course architect determines how long it *should* take to play a course, while the golf course management team grapples with how long it does take to play the course. Somehow these two times are never the same.

Based on the playing length, location and difficulty of obstacles, and travel distances from greens to tees (all elements of the routing and design), an objective measure of the

time it should take to play can be calculated. Obviously every course will have its own unique time, or Pace Rating (created by the USGA).

But the tension is this. From opening day, the course management team’s daily practices are what will determine how long it actually does take to play the course. However, those practices need to be tailored to the unique demands of the design. Then, careful day-to-day hands-on management is required to achieve the optimal Pace Rating.

Forrest Richardson, ASGCA, thinks designers and managers have little clue as to the real issues. “Many of the beliefs of golf designers and managers with regard to slow pace are pure bunk,” he says. “We have grown up believing that an opening hole par three is bad, that too many par threes are bad, that it is the golfer who is mostly at fault. We even believe that the rude marshal who travels about the course glaring at players is somehow the answer. In reality, when you view the problem from a scientific viewpoint, you find

how wrong many of these beliefs are.”

“A course that has long walks might feel quicker than a contiguous course because of waits,” he adds. “So what architects need to do is to design a course that has a good natural flow, and where waits are minimized.” In Richardson’s book *Routing the Golf Course* he writes: “The flow of courses is about rhythm, balance and sequence.” “A routing plan must give careful attention to each,” he adds. “Without these qualities, the golf course might as well be an ordinary maze and the golfer a rat looking for cheese.”

Bobby Weed, ASGCA, has plenty of experience of designing courses that must cope with slow play, having spent several years as chief architect for the PGA Tour. “The single most important aspect of golf course design may be the time spent routing,” he says. “Many projects today are dependent on real estate to finance the golf course and thus incorporate road crossings and sprawling, linear layouts to create development frontage. The core



If golfers have to endure excessively long waits, an opportunity to gain loyalty may be missed

golf course is somewhat rare today. Certainly, where possible, minimizing the green to tee distance is the favored design fundamental. To achieve this, it is preferred to route the golf course first or in conjunction with the overall land use plan. Given today's golf market, it is absolutely essential to route courses that efficiently use the land, thereby allowing players to use their time efficiently. Developers who insist on the tired old formula of lining courses on all sides with development are quickly killing the game by making it too time consuming and costly. No matter where in the world it is built, a golf course should always enhance a development's bottom line while also maintaining its own."

Today, the natural tension between golf course design and management can be eliminated. During the design phase, technology can be used to predetermine the impact of alternate design options on future management practices. Play can be simulated on new or remodeling plans to determine and document

the optimal design choices and management practices to deploy. For example, in a re-routing it is possible to forecast pace and 'see' how a par three or par five hole at a particular point on a given routing option will affect the flow of play. With computer simulations able to assist in selecting the appropriate starting interval for a particular design and help in fine-tuning hole length options, this is powerful information. And it can all be accomplished before any work gets done to make physical changes.

Ultimately, having the right starting interval and having accurate monitoring tools at the outset will enable the management team to reduce on-course waiting, optimize round times, and maximize the revenue-generating utilization of that design.

So along with a breathtaking course design, architects can deliver a recommended set of best operational practices and management tools that can be used from opening day. Then players will come off the course saying: 'What a great course and what a great experience; I'll be back!' ●



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