

Moving forward



By Design speaks with a panel of golf course architects about the Longleaf Tee Initiative.

THE PANEL

Clyde Johnston, ASGCA, is based in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, and is President of the ASGCA Foundation.



Greg Muirhead, ASGCA, is based in New Jersey and is Vice President of the ASGCA Foundation.



John LaFoy, ASGCA, is based in South Carolina and is a former President of the ASGCA Foundation.



The ASGCA Foundation has teamed up with the U.S. Kids Golf Foundation on an initiative to encourage more clubs to adopt teeing systems like the one introduced at the Longleaf Golf & Family Club in Pinehurst, North Carolina. By providing data and guidance on how golf clubs can introduce an improved range of teeing options at their facilities, the aim of the Longleaf Tee Initiative is to give every golfer, regardless of their skill level, the ability to play at a good pace, shoot lower scores and have more fun.

By Design spoke with three ASGCA Past Presidents who have been instrumental in the development of the Longleaf Tee Initiative—Clyde Johnston, ASGCA; John LaFoy, ASGCA and Greg Muirhead, ASGCA—each of whom believes that many more golf clubs could benefit from introducing similar teeing systems on their courses.

Why should golf clubs think about introducing the Longleaf Tee System, or similar, on their golf courses?

Johnston: The Longleaf Tee System is a completely new and different way of thinking about setting up a golf course so that people of all ages and abilities can have more fun playing golf. The tee you play from is based on how far you hit your tee shot. Every tee is gender neutral and should be USGA rated for men and women. The system also breaks the mold of the tee marker color system that has stifled many players from playing from a tee more suited to their game.

While this system increases the number of tee areas on a golf hole, it also increases the ability of the golf facility to attract new players and retain current players by providing a tee suited to their skill level. This system allows young players to start playing from shorter yardages, then



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As players age and lose distance, they can still have fun by moving forward to an appropriate tee

move back to longer tees as their skill and distances increase. Then as players age and lose distance, they can move forward to an appropriate tee and still have fun playing golf.

Muirhead: This system will help create a more enjoyable experience for all golfers. It will retain aging players, as well as welcome and accommodate new players of all ages. The system is gender neutral and helps keep the game fun and exciting by allowing all golfers, regardless of skill, a more realistic opportunity to reach greens in regulation, make pars and experience some level of success, which will encourage them to stay with the game. All of that translates to more golfers playing more rounds, which improves the overall health of the game. It will also help boost the operational success of individual facilities, both public and private.

LaFoy: Firstly, we must acknowledge that many of our golfers who were responsible for the ‘golf boom’ of the

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Greg Muirhead,
ASGCA Past President

1990s are getting older. Some have left the game because courses have just become too difficult for them to negotiate in terms of yardage. Many of the male players are reluctant to move to the most forward set of tees

that may have always been considered ‘ladies tees.’ For some reason, we also seem to have a mindset that all ladies play from the same set of tees, which is as ridiculous as thinking all men should play from the same set. By using the Longleaf Tee System, we are merely acknowledging what we have known all along—that golf is a lot more fun when played from a distance that aligns with our physical ability and skill level.

One of the reasons I am excited about it is that three of the last clubs that have contacted me were all calling about adding tees to their course because of their older members. None of them had heard about the Longleaf Tee System, so this is something that was coming from them, and not prompted by anything they had read. I have always thought that ‘real’ movements start at the grass roots—the bottom of the pyramid so to speak, and not

at the top. Programs such as this work when clubs are demanding it, not when they are being told it is something they need to do.

Is there not a concern that adopting the system may be expensive and disruptive?

Muirhead: Although the cost of adding new tees and properly implementing the system is subject to a variety of site-specific variables, including the desired construction methodology, I think in most cases, the answer is ‘no’. Many courses, especially those built during the past 20 years, already have multiple teeing grounds that can easily accommodate the majority of recommended tee marker locations. Sometimes, simply extending the front or rear of an existing tee is all that’s required. Where additional forward tees are necessary, they can often be easily sculpted into existing fairways and roughs at a very low cost. Sometimes those tees can even be added on existing grades, with no actual ‘construction’ required. Compared to other course improvements, the cost and inconvenience associated with adding tees is minimal, while the potential benefits and ‘bang for the buck’ are significant.

Johnston: Building new tees is one of the least expensive construction items on golf courses, but this system may work on some courses without any new tees. It all depends on the topography of the golf course and the imagination of the person laying out the tees. The most forward tees are often a flat part of the fairway and defined with a plaque mounted flush with the ground for ease of maintenance. If new tees are added, they are generally smaller in scope and perhaps slightly off to one side of the golf hole. Every golf course will be different in terms of where and how new tee areas are created or located. An ASGCA member can layout the tee system, provide a cost estimate and even get competitive prices for the work.

Why use an ASGCA member to do this type of work?

Muirhead: One of the reasons Dan Van Horn and his team at the U.S. Kids Golf Foundation reached out to the ASGCA Foundation to partner on this initiative was because they realized ASGCA members have the skill set and experience required to properly evaluate each site and determine the most beneficial tee locations, both in terms of playability and cost effective construction, to best adapt and implement the system to a given property. Achieving that is paramount to creating the desired golfer experience and the overall success of the program and facility. Our members are also best equipped to introduce the Longleaf Tee System and educate decision-makers

regarding its scope and benefits, as well as helping to develop associated construction costs and schedules. I believe the participation of ASGCA members is critical to the success of the program.

LaFoy: ASGCA members are engaged in the design of golf courses on a full-time basis and, as professional designers, they have been fully vetted by their peers. The ASGCA has gone to great lengths to explain and educate our members about the Longleaf Tee System. We share information not only about this, but all phases of golf course design, as we understand that the more our members know, the better we can serve the golfing community. Continuing education is and always has been a major facet of the ASGCA. ●



Photo: iStockphoto/ImagineGolf

Positive reception

We asked Greg Muirhead, ASGCA, how the Longleaf Tee Initiative has been received in discussions with clients.

The response has been very positive. Similar to the experience of our ASGCA Foundation Board, when we visited Longleaf for a first-hand tour and program presentation by ASGCA member Bill Bergin, people are typically surprised by the simplicity of the system. After a short presentation, it’s easy for most to understand the considerable research and data that supported the development of the system and appreciate the potential benefits.

As with any proposed course improvement, many of the questions relate to cost. I always emphasize the methods available to manage costs, while still implementing the program. I also stress the need for each facility to consider how implementing the program can help increase participation and positively impact a facility’s bottom line. There’s certainly a return on investment, not only with revenue from the increased rounds played, but also with increased cart rentals, food and beverage sales, merchandise sales and lessons.