

The War on Slow Play – Weapons of Intelligent Design

Golf has changed dramatically in the past two decades, for good and for bad. Square drivers, four-piece golf balls, motorised transport for clubs and player, and immaculate golf course conditioning all make the game easier to play than ever before. Despite all these improvements, golfers are now taking longer to play 18-holes than at any other time in the history of the sport.

Who is to blame is another story, but in a world where we need devices that make phone calls, receive email and surf the internet just to keep pace with life, golf has a speed problem and it's one that is causing golfers frustration and costing golf course owners money, and lots of it.

It's a problem that has encroached into the profession of golf course design and placed the architect in the front-line of the battle against slow play in golf. As a General would draw up a battle plan for a swift and decisive assault on an enemy position, the golf course architect now considers slow play the to the overall design of any new development.

Fortunately, golf course architects are armed with many tactics to ensure that golfers playing their courses still experience enjoyment and do not leave frustrated and angered at the time it has taken to play round. The commercial success of a new golf course, particularly a golf resort, holiday destination or pay and play course depends on the state of mind of the golfer leaving the course and whether they will consider returning and spending their money to play again.

Golf is a hugely competitive market where reputation is everything and this knowledge influences the behaviour of a golf course architect from the moment they lay eyes on the site of a new golf course, and drives them to plan ways to design a course that looks great, challenges golfers of all ability; but most importantly plays fast.

The greens are the starting point for any golf course architect looking to accelerate the play of the golfer whose pre-shot routine is more sacred to him than his wedding ring. Greens that are designed with severe contours and slopes will always slow down play as golfers are forced to engage in complicated green reading and manage a combination of slope, break and speed that often results in players taking three and four putts.

As handicaps get higher, this process will take even longer and is bound to add seconds and minutes to the time needed to hole out, especially if golfers behave as they are taught to and stick to their routine on every putt. By adopting a sensible policy in the design of green complexes, and presenting flatter spacious areas, as well as interesting sloping contours, an architect provides the opportunity for flat

areas to be utilised in general resort or daily member play. This makes putting easier and speeds up play.

The entry and exit points to greens are always a major consideration, and it is sacrilege to design aesthetically pleasing greenside bunkers that force the player to take a 100-metre detour just to get back to the route to the next tee. By inserting clearly visible exit points and pathways that logically meet with the routing to the next tee, golfers can save vital time.

The distance that separates the green and the next tee is another feature of golf course design that has changed drastically, as the development of golf courses has changed to accommodate new trends, including the positioning of on-course real estate and the use of motorised buggies. When the New Course in St Andrews, Scotland was first designed in 1895, by a civil engineer from Edinburgh with help from Old Tom Morris, the layout was designed so that the walk from green to the next tee was sometimes as little as ten steps and at most no more than 40 metres. The course possesses the essential quality of 'flow' and moves effortlessly from one hole to the next.

The introduction of real estate on golf courses has meant that courses built to accommodate integrated communities often have extensive walks between greens and tees as the course design is adapted to blend with housing. These gaps in flow are often overcome by the introduction of cart and buggy paths which enable golfers to travel quicker around the site in buggies, which are also a considerable source of additional revenue for any club or resort.

Golf courses are now far longer as a result of these changes, and many – including Augusta National – are also lengthened in response to technological advancements in equipment and longer driving distances. The total distance travelled over a round has gone from measuring around 6,500 metres to being more than 8,000 metres. Longer walks between greens and tees are a challenge, because naturally it takes longer for the golfer who walks or pulls a trolley, and because there is a delicate need to balance the relationship between the residential community and the golf course that attracts prospective residents and sustains their interest.

This is an area in the war on slow play that may be lost, particularly in the resort and golf tourism sector, because golf courses are unlikely to follow the speedy model of the St Andrews New Course and because an architect must work with the land that is available. In response though, there is much a club or resort can do to educate golfers as to what is expected of their pace of play, and together with intelligent design, the two can have considerable impact and encourage good flow of rounds through the course. I played recently in Malaysia, where golf courses exhibited signs at the 6th, 9th and 12th holes that indicated how long you should have taken to reach this point, and of course, a friendly but firm course ranger can do much to enhance flow around the course.

Teeing grounds are another area where much can be done to speed up play. Multiple teeing grounds allow flexibility such that a course can play either incredibly difficult or simple and straightforward, depending on where you teed up and how good you are. As the architect, you can dictate a lot of what happens from the tee, and courses with long carries over water and scrub, or deep fairway bunkers positioned at 180 metres plus, are likely to suffer from slow play as the higher handicap golfers struggle to find safety from the tee and take even longer to recover from trouble.

The real science for the architect is in creating a course that actually plays easier than it looks. Examples of this philosophy include widening the fairways at intermediate distances and thinning rough there, while tightening the fairway and growing deep rough in at the professional to top amateur driving distance. While the course appears difficult and challenges the better golfer, it actually enables the higher handicappers – the majority of golfers – to play the course quicker.

Far less complicated and logical solutions present themselves in the blueprint for any golf course, and this includes trying to position a practice putting green close to the first tee so that golfers can get accustomed to the speed of the greens on the course before starting their round. The same applies to the practice tee, as a warmed up golfer is likely to start playing better quicker, rather than having to spend five slow holes finding their swing because it was too far to walk to the range beforehand.

There are many people involved in the war on slow play in golf, including club managers, governing bodies and teaching professionals, but golf course architects can do much to ensure that people continue to be able to enjoy the game of golf in an era when people are more 'time-poor' than ever before.