Denver speeds up play: Drastic but effective measures

BY PETER BLAIS
Four years ago it took almost 5-1/2 hours to play a round of golf at Wellshire Golf Course in Denver, Colo.
That was before the City Council voted to begin timing players and allowing management to remove stragglers from the Donald Ross course.
The result? Forty-five minutes were shaved off the average round, according to City Director of Golf Dennis Wong. Golfers who had avoided Wellshire because of slow play began returning. And, most importantly, at least to the Mile High City's pocketbook, speedier play has meant a 20-percent jump in rounds and revenue.
Denver's experiment represents a possible solution to the slow play and crowded conditions that have accompanied golf's recent growth and threaten its future.

Casas—

"That's probably my fault," said Casas. "I started a policy that no relatives could work at the golf courses. I started out for the health and safety of the employees themselves."

But something had to be done in Denver, particularly at Wellshire. With its tight fairways and heavy demand, an average round at Wellshire was taking an hour and 40 minutes longer to play than the NGF's national figure of three hours and 50 minutes.

A late-1986 brainstorming session involving city course superintendents, pros and the golf director resulted in the Denver policy, explained Wong.

"Beginning in 1987 at Wellshire and John F. Kennedy Municipal Golf Course, tee times were stamped on a group's scorecard at the first tee. The card was checked at the fourth hole at Wellshire, and stamped again at the ninth at both courses. If the elapsed time after the ninth was more than the recommended two hours and 20 minutes, the group was encouraged to speed up play. Course personnel also had the City Council-approved right, though it has been exercised less often in recent years, to ask the group to leave with no refund.

Wong estimated a dozen groups, mostly beginners, were asked to pack their bags that first summer. Course personnel usually suggested they play the city's par-3 course and return when they had a better grasp of the game. That advice was usually well received, said Wong.

"We timed every group to keep people aware of where they should be on the course. A lot of beginners and novices simply didn't understand. Our intention wasn't to remove people, just to keep them moving," said Wong.

Wong said experienced players occasionally balked at the time limit.

"The men's clubs sometimes felt we were pushing them around the course," he said. "With all the TV coverage, they'd see a pro standing over a putt forever and think they had to do the same. We have all kinds of literature from the PGA discouraging slow play that we show them. And we tell them about the penalties for slow play on the PGA Tour, how it can be a lot of money out of a pro's pocket if he is penalized a stroke or two."

The occasional complaint aside, the vast majority favored timing players, said Wong. The program was so successful, it was extended to all seven city-owned courses.

Very rarely is a player asked to leave now that golfers are familiar with the system. People are coming back to Denver's courses, particularly Wellshire.

"Word got out that you can play it in 4-1/2 hours or less, again," said Wong.

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