EDITORIAL FOCUS: Speed of Play
From GPS to caddies, solutions abound for improving speed of play

BY ANDREW OVERBECK

As golf participation rates remain flat, a number of companies have introduced services aimed at reducing what some experts say is the number one problem with the game today—the amount of time it takes to play 18 holes.

"The two things that will kill the golden goose are speed of play and what it costs to play," said architect Michael Hurdzan. "We have to control those two things."

If the industry continues to build and operate courses that take an average of five hours a round to play, Hurdzan contends, those courses will not fail, but will also discourage new or occasional golfers from playing more often.

Solutions, ranging from Global Positioning Systems (GPS) to caddie programs to pace of play consultants, are available to help courses improve speed of play.

MANAGEMENT IS THE KEY

According to Bill Yates, head of Pace Manager Systems and the developer of the USGA pace rating system, the key to improving speed of play starts with the management of players.

"I look at the management of the golf course before player behavior," said Yates, who does three-day evaluations for about a dozen courses per year. "First we do an objective measurement of how long it should take to play the course and then we compare it with how long it is actually taking to play the course.

"We attack every issue: getting players to the first tee efficiently and on-time, loading the course properly so that it is not overcrowded, and making sure that the marshals have the tools they need."

The number one mistake says Yates is not knowing where the players are. "If a group is checked in and the starter doesn't know where they are, then the group is late and your whole day is thrown off because you have to push other groups out early to get them on time," he said. "Then you have screwed up your intervals and overcrowded the course."

Secondary to management is managing player behavior. The key to this is communication, said Yates. "A club can do this any number of ways, caddies, GPS, a lime sheet," he said. "The idea is to offer feedback and information that drives their behavior."

Courses curb slow play with strict policies

BY ANDREW OVERBECK

With courses across the country struggling with speed of play issues, some facilities are developing innovative, home-grown solutions.

For the Eastmoreland Golf Course in Portland, Ore., the solution to seemingly never-ending five-and-a-half-hour rounds of golf was the implementation of the "Eastmoreland Speed of Play Policy."

The straightforward policy requires all players to finish their round in four hours and thirty-eight minutes. If a group falls behind, the ranger warns them. If they still can't keep pace, the ranger has the power to force the group to play the next hole from the 150-yard markers.

— Eastmoreland GC's Speed of Play Policy

Heritage Golf takes another course private

SAN DIEGO — Heritage Golf Group is planning to take another course private. The golf course owner and operator will be transitioning its Hamilton Mill Golf Club in Daucal, Ga., from a daily-fee course into a private club.

Opened in 1995, Hamilton Mill’s 18-hole, par 72 golf course was designed by architect Gene Bates and 1992 Masters Champion and PGA Tour player Fred Couples.

The club is now offering individual, corporate, and family memberships to those living both inside and outside the Hamilton Mill residential community. During its transition, the club will continue to welcome limited daily-fee play and outings until complete privatization is achieved within the next two to four years.

Heritage Golf Group acquired Hamilton Mill from SMG Development Associates LP in November 2000. The company also owns and operates White Columns Country Club in Alpharetta, Ga., that it took private earlier this year.

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The straightforward policy requires all players to finish their round in four hours and thirty-eight minutes. If a group falls behind, the ranger warns them. If they still can't keep pace, the ranger has the power to force the group to play the next par-4 or par-5 hole from the 150-yard markers. If the group falls behind again, they may either be moved up or removed from the course without a refund. Golfers are required to read the policy and sign a form indicating that they have agreed to abide by the rules.

While the policy sounds harsh, course manager Clark Cumpston said the reaction by most golfers has been overwhelmingly positive.

"People realize that they can now come to Eastmoreland and play here late in the day. Before, people were staying away because they knew the course slowed down in the afternoon," Cumpston said. "Last year we averaged five-hour rounds and would occasionally melt down into five-and-half-hour rounds. This year we are doing four-hour-and-forty-minute rounds. It has helped our speed of play more than I thought it would."

Cumpston, who pushes 60,000 rounds through each year, has not had to remove many players from the course.

"We have a difficult, tight course with a lot of water on the back nine," he added. "There are times when people have to be moved, and they are not happy about it. Everyone thinks that they are a fast player and are surprised when they are really not fast."

PACE OF PAPER

Mike Erwin, head golf professional at The Sportsmans Club, a municipal course in Northbrook,