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Why they quit the game

Why do 3 million players quit golf each year?

Putting this question in context, it's noted that 3 million people also take up the game each year. But because it's difficult to bring players to the game and easy to lose them, the future welfare of the game requires the above question be addressed. Considering possible solutions to this crucial problem requires debunking three long-standing myths.

Myth No. 1: Golfers leave the game because scheduling tee times is a constant struggle. **Reality:** Because the preponderance of good municipal and semiprivate golf courses throughout the country provide as many as eight-day priority tee time access, golf can be scheduled comfortably when there's a will to do so.

Myth No. 2: Golfers leave the game because it's too expensive to play. **Reality:** While golf electively is expensive for some, the game remains affordable to the general golfing public. The secondary club market has developed to the point where a good set of used clubs can be purchased for \$500 or less. Regarding fees, many millions of residents living within municipal districts and members at many semiprivate golf courses can play 25 to 30 rounds of golf a year for less than \$1,000.

Myth No. 3: Golfers leave the game because of the time it takes to play a round of golf. **Reality:** In the current golf world, slow play is no longer tolerated. Almost every popular golf course will maintain play at less than four-and-a-half hours.

Younger families don't have the leisure time to play golf regularly, this reality should dictate when someone plays golf, not whether an individual commits to playing golf. Golf doesn't require people to play it continuously throughout their lives. Rather, the game is a patient "friend" that allows people to choose when they connect, disconnect and reconnect with the game as changing circumstances in their lives allow.

The real problem

The paramount factor that drives golfers from the game is the difficulty playing the game, which often can be attributed to too many overbearing golf courses and not making effective golf instruction available to the masses.

The problems with too many new golf courses are:

1. With the better lands often long gone, new courses are built on more difficult sites, which produce more difficult new golf courses that result in 125 to 135 slope ratings from the men's regular tees. Recognizing that the national slope average for men is 113, more user-friendly golf courses should be designed within a 110 to 120-slope-rating range.

2. More difficult courses also can result from a latent conflict of interest between a project's golf course architect and its developer. This situation arises because the developer generally wants a course designed for everyone to play, and the architect generally wants a course that will earn the highest possible ranking, which means it will be comfortably playable only by the better players. The net result is a growing inventory of golf courses that discourages typical players more than it encourages them to play. Architects defend their aggressive designs by explaining that six sets of tees for each hole allows everyone to play a course comfortably. However, too many architects consistently overdefend their greens, which can add five to 10 strokes to a player's handicap.

Real solutions

The basic remedy for this problem is to educate the development community about the slope-rating system – what it means and how it can be helpful.

Then, preliminarily slope rate golf courses during the construction-plan phase before they're built to put everyone on notice and to allow for plans to be amended when appropriate. Currently, a golf course is slope rated only after it's built and opens. This dual approach should result in more courses being designed for their clients' needs than for the pursuit of higher course rankings.

Difficulty of play is also a problem with many older golf courses because the majority older golf courses fail to provide the industry-recommended 6,100-yard tees for all male players with 15 and higher handicaps. These older golf courses generally are playing from about 6,400-yard tees, which will consistently add four to eight frustrating strokes to a player's medal score.

An approach that would soften older

courses, where necessary, would be to establish sets of 6,100-yard tees at courses that don't have them. This practice is underway throughout the country, with the new 6,100-yard tees designated as "green" tees. Other steps to consider include converting some of the strategic sand bunkers on a golf course to grass bunkers and controlling speed on fast-paced greens.

The paramount problem facing golf is the perceived complexity of golf instruction. Because golf is played in a 360-degree, three-dimensional environment, it can be difficult to teach and learn. This results in present day golf instruction being far less effective than the game requires.

A large segment of the game's teachers have fallen into the trap of overpresenting micro techniques before helping students master macro principles. This is too often exemplified by watching an inexperienced instructor using micro techniques to establish a neutral grip with a beginning student before establishing the most fundamental macro teaching principle that the club head should approach the ball at a square angle. Teaching "why" is often more effective than teaching "how."

Golf is faced with the huge challenge of restructuring its basic approach to teaching the common player. Golf can no longer afford to allow the game's most inexperienced instructors to teach the mil-

lions of the game's most inexperienced players. This can be accomplished by qualifying and rating teachers before granting them access to the country's in-

structional programs, and by using modern communications technology to improve golf-instruction visuals.

The golf industry has paid millions of dollars to consulting and marketing firms during recent years in a failed attempt to bring more players to the game and to keep them there. This approach has been less than effective because golf cannot buy its way to player-development success. Rather, the answers lie within moderating overly aggressive course design, and more importantly, substantially improving the quality of golf instruction.

The question remains, who will lead the renaissance? GCN

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