



John Walsh
Editor

Get shorty

Golf has been in a growth spurt – just look at the numbers. In 1970, there were about 11 million players. Presently, there are about 26 million.

Thanks in part to captivating professionals like Tiger Woods, the game has never been more popular. Still, popularity doesn't necessarily translate to participation.

In fact, there's room to increase participation, and many individuals and associations are working toward that goal. The PGA of America, through its Play Golf America program, and the Golf Course Builders Association of America, through its Sticks for Kids Foundation, are encouraging more people to golf – and golf more frequently. Another initiative, the First Tee, which encourages young people to develop character and solid values through golf, currently has 125 chapters and 154 facilities throughout the country.

Such programs teach newcomers the game's rewards, as well as basics like etiquette, including speed of play. This issue of time is a considerable factor affecting participation. Some people say they don't have enough time to play golf, or they say the game takes too long to play.

As a result, some in the industry, including architects, have suggested focusing on courses that are fewer than 18 holes and 18-hole courses that are considerably shorter than 7,000 yards. This would take some creative marketing to work. "Culturally, we have to overcome the perception that you're not a wimp for not playing 18 holes," said MG Orender, president of the PGA of America, at the GCBAA's annual summer meeting.

Nine-hole courses present the challenge of maintaining profitability. Because green fees correlate with the cost of building and maintaining a course, a shorter course is less expensive to play. This benefits those players who say the cost of golf is another reason why they don't play, or at least play as much as they'd like.

A less expensive course fits the portion of the golfing public that wants to play nine holes. Owners might not be fond of golfers playing a round of nine because it's cheaper than a round of 18, but a round of nine is better than no round at all. The pay-off for owners is more players, more often.

Nonetheless, shorter courses – nine holes or 18 – buck the industry trend of developing 18-hole championship courses. Some of the 200 golf courses that will open this

year are longer than 7,400 yards, with as many as five sets of tee boxes. These courses cater to the better-conditioned golfers who hit the ball farther because of more instruction, better equipment, and more playing opportunities through more courses and tournaments.

Statistics show that in 1980, a professional golfer's average drive was 257 yards, compared with the current average of 286 yards, according to Doug Winfield, a mechanical engineer who designs golf equipment. This is because of more consistent golf balls with 300 to 500 dimples instead of the old standard of 336. New clubs, which are longer, lighter and lower-lofted than older models, also contribute to longer driving distances.

Course conditions, such as lower-cut greens and fairways, increased drainage and easier bunkers in which to play, also contribute to longer courses.

Golfers are hitting balls farther, yet many don't have time to play 18 holes regularly or courses that are longer than 7,000 yards. The executive short course could be part of a growing trend of developing shorter courses to allow busy people to play golf more quickly, more often and less expensively.

Some already have found success with this model. Outside San Francisco in Dublin, Calif., a Taiwanese real-estate developer, R.S. Lin, built the 18-hole Dublin Ranch Golf Course, which plays 4,331 yards from the front tees and 4,791 yards from the back tees. However, it isn't inexpensive because of things like maintaining 8,000-square-foot greens. But the concept behind the par-63 course was to develop one that could be played in three-and-a-half hours or less.

The industry is filled with smart and creative individuals who can address golfers' time and cost challenges through changes in course design, development and maintenance, whether on new or existing courses. If this happens, the industry likely could witness more courses like Dublin Ranch open – courses that experienced and novice golfers can enjoy.

Having more golfers in general is a worthy goal, not just increasing the number of 18-hole rounds played. Getting more people involved, and staying involved, in the game, regardless of ability, is better business for all courses, no matter what the length. GCN

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