



Jeffrey D. Brauer is a licensed golf course architect and president of GolfScapes, a golf course design firm in Arlington, Texas. Brauer, a past president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, can be reached at jeff@jeffreymbrauer.com.

DESIGNING FOR THE REAL PLAYER

With the start of the PGA Tour season, we are again hearing about how easy courses are for tour pros. While a double-digit under par score still has the potential for alarm, the average winning scores – not to mention the average of average scores – really haven't changed much from the days of Arnie and Jack.

In my opinion, there is too much design directed at professional golfers who will never show up at the typical course. So the question to me is, "Why?" Why do we design primarily to thwart the best of the best in the world from playing well?

Why are we designing to raise the score of a tour pro who will never play our course, when it makes the course much harder for the everyday, average golfer in terms of speed of play, enjoyment and reasonable challenge? Even the difference between tour pro and top amateur is more substantial than most think, and most good players really prefer a chance at shooting 68 more than the difficulty level of a tour course.

Why are we building for "tournament standards" when:

- Location, infrastructure and tour schedules mean there is almost no chance of hosting a tournament?

- When the USGA has shown us that we can modify the rough depth, fairway width, green speeds, pin locations and even reduce par itself from 72 to 70 temporarily to make par a good score?

- In resort or retirement areas, knowing that 99 percent of players will play a far shorter course? Or, stated differently, do we really need every course to have back tees at 7,200 yards for the few dozen each year that actually use them?

Why are we doing this to sell real estate, including:

- Numerous bunkers specifically to create views from surrounding property?
- Steep contours for shadow patterns
- Longer courses (up to 8,000 yards) to create more real estate opportunity?
- Long cart rides between holes to add real estate value – but slow down play?

Finally, I question why we're designing to obtain "Top 100" or "Best New" ranking for marketing, which typically requires a large degree of

difficulty, when chances of obtaining such a rating are slim? And, even when studies show that 90 percent of golf rounds are played on the nearest course, with the most friends, and at the most reasonable price, meaning those designations probably provide very little marketing value?

Even at existing clubs, how many committees are dominated by the top players at the club, resulting in changes to increase difficulty?

I believe in the old design adage that "form follows function" and I realize that golf course design has drifted from that truism substantially. After designing for tournaments, views and awards, too little thought is given to the actual end user, who is normally the focus of design. While the economy is certainly the biggest reason

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for less play, and since golf has weathered worse storms in its more than 600 years of existence and will probably bounce back at some point, I have to wonder if these designs will enhance or reduce golf's appeal and vitality.

Part of the greatness of the older courses still on tour, such as Riviera and Colonial, is that they were designed primarily as "member's courses" to be enjoyed in everyday play, but which can be made more difficult on occasions, even if the pros score a little lower than we might like. Perhaps we need the Seinfeld characters to remind us: "Not that there is anything wrong with that."

Given the greater competition for all recreation time and money, golf courses will need to embrace the classical elements of these courses that make them "fun courses" rather than "tough courses." They should be renovated to very specifically target what makes golf fun for the average player.

A good start is to recognize that the highest honor a course can achieve is the label "fun to play every day." **GCI**