Tees: misplaced, misdirected, misused, and abused

by Joseph S. Finger, P.E.

(This is the first half of a two-part series. The second half, on the subject of the physical abuse and maintenance of tees, will appear in GOLF BUSINESS next month.)

No other part of the golf course is used so much, misused so frequently, and discussed so infrequently as the teeing area.

A golfer might play every hole down the rough, never hit a fairway, never hit a sand trap, and theoretically hole out eighteen shots from off the green, thereby missing all the expensive parts of the course. But according to the rules of golf, he must start the next hole from the teeing area. Yet tees are misunderstood, abused, misused, and neglected to the point where "something should be done about it."

The condition of the grass on the tees is only one slight part of the abuse which is given to teeing ground. Abuse or misuse of tees ranges from misplacement of tees to the handicapping system for all golfers. We will take a look at these one by one.

In the old days, we had a tee box, consisting of either a cleared area of ground or, later on, an elevated "box" from which all play began. Often the box was not more than 2 by 3 yards in size; and at the side was the old sand box in which sufficient moist bank sand was maintained to allow golfers to mold their individual tees, long before the wooden tee was invented. This practice might still have some real merit inasmuch as it did eventually leave a cover of fairly good soil on each tee. It also meant that all players started at the same spot; and, there-

"Too many design tees so that the front is not facing down the fairway. It is amazing how many golfers will tee up in the wrong direction."

fore, the differences in their playing abilities could be judged accurately.

As the game of golf progressed, the numbers of players increased and players demanded progressively better teeing areas. Tees therefore were expanded to much larger areas so that the grass could recover in well-used areas, and so that different classes of golfers could tee up at different positions. Tees today are sometimes almost as long as par-three holes used to be. And herein lies one of the major abuses.

The handicap system

The handicap system for golf is intended to equalize players of various abilities so that the match or contest will be more interesting. In no other sport in this country does the handicap system play such an important part in making the game more even for players of widely different abilities.

A strong tennis player might hate to get on the court with his wife because she can hardly return the ball; but in the game of golf, a man can have a fairly interesting golf match with his wife because the contest is evened out by the handicap system. Similarly, players at different clubs can engage in contests with each other because their handicaps permit adjustments due to their differences in abilities as well as differences in their courses. But this assumes that the handicaps are all based on a fair and simi-
or clubs were to compete, it is possible which will be discussed later.

If the two classes of players would not under these circumstances be “playing the same course,” and therefore their handicaps might be incorrect.

What’s the answer? That’s a tough one. Perhaps courses could set the tee markers up so that everyone plays the same teeing ground (plus or minus 5 yards from the rated yardage of the hole) on about 20 different days each year. With a little luck, each golfer would get in about a dozen rounds “playing the same course.” His handicap would have to be based on these dozen rounds instead of perhaps two or three times that number if he turns in a card every time he plays. But the handicap might be more meaningful.

**Tee-to-hazard distances**

Another abuse of tees lies with the designer who does not seem to relate the abilities of various classes of golfers in the placement of hazards. Generally when I design a course, I feel that the average golfer who plays on weekends only has enough trouble getting around the course without getting into hazards on his tee shots; and I try to design these hazards starting no less than 215-225 yards off the middle tees. At this distance, most golfers will never reach the hazard. But by the same token, I feel that the long hitter is my “lawful prey;” and I want these hazards to catch his shot if he strays. But to do so, the hazard must be in the 235-280 yard range. This means that under a given set of conditions, the championship tees must be kept from 20 to 35 yards behind the regular tees.

The hazards on the golf course are usually designed and constructed to create a penal situation for the errant golfer who plays well. That hazard should not normally be reached by the average golfer. If both play the same tees, the average golfer would then be playing a golf course much longer than he cares to play; and his scores would always be high. If the average golfer’s teeing area is moved forward sufficiently, the course might be shortened; but the hazards would then come into play for this type of golfer. The correct relationship between placement of hazards for the average golfer and a placement of hazards for championship golfers will be discussed later; but it is obvious that the two classes of players would not under these circumstances be “playing the same course.”

**Some courses have as many as five different teeing areas for five different classes of golfers.**

members who “had it easy” by playing the front part of the tees on their own course will have lower relative handicaps if the other club is handicap-eption on a proper basis from the rated distance, and thereby will play at a disadvantage.

For other reasons it may be desirable to separate golfers of varying abilities instead of having everyone playing from the same teeing ground.

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course might be too difficult for the higher handicap player.

Tee in relation to pin position
On many courses, the holes are not so long or so subtle that a relatively unfair situation can develop if the pin is in a particular location on a green and the tee markers are not adjusted accordingly. In most courses any teeing area is okay for any pin position. But not so on many championship, or longer, courses — particularly where doglegs are involved.

There are situations where the pin position can be so tough (such as tucked behind a yawning, deep trap) that it is almost unfair to ask a golfer to try to hit a 215-225-yard shot over the trap from his fairway lie. Sometimes the shot required and the shape and slope of the green is such that the only way that the player has a chance to go for the flag is to be able to use a medium iron. Under these conditions, the tee marker should be moved to such a position on the tee that a fine drive (245-275 yards for championship players) will permit the use of the medium iron on the approach shot. On this same hole, a less protected pin position on the green might permit the tee markers to be moved back so that even a well-placed drive could require a long iron or three wood shot at the pin.

A few years ago at one of my toughest courses, an invitation tournament was being held in which 27 of the touring pros participated. On several of the holes, the tournament officials overlooked coordinating the tee markers with the pin positions, and less than 30 percent of the pros parred these holes. You can imagine the bellyaching. I advised the officials that I thought the pin positions should be coordinated with the tee markers, and the next morning they permitted me to set both. I shortened the course by 250 yards, and the pros still didn’t “chop it up,” but there were no more complaints of “unfair.”

Similarly, when I used to play in the Champions Cup Matches at the Champions Golf Club in Houston, which I regard as one of the finest amateur tournaments in the country, Demaret and Burke used to love to put the tee markers back so far that one wag quipped “we are hitting the bushes on our backswings.” With the long par fours at Champions, and with some of the doglegs tightly guarded by trees, it was virtually impossible for even the best amateurs to go for a flag which was tucked to the extreme dogleg side of the hole or just over a deep trap. We were forced to play tee shots away from the dogleg, leaving tremendously long shots (often over hazards) into the green. Naturally, very few birdies were made and pars were tough to come by.

Should tees be long?
Another abuse of tees stems from the belief that the long tees are build by the architect so that the course can be made constantly longer and tougher as each round of the tournament is played. Some people feel that players should start with the tee markers up front and move them back 10 yards each day of the tournament. This shows a real lack of understanding of the game of golf and particularly the design of golf courses. I think most good golf course architects like to see their courses played at approxi-
strength of the winds predicted for the following day. He should then set his tee markers accordingly. How often have you played a course in which the tee markers have been moved toward the back of the tee (for no apparent reason) only to find that you have a 15-knot wind in your face? On the next hole, the reverse might be true.

Long tees are designed to allow flexibility of the hole with respect to the hazards, to the wind, and to the wetness of the course, not just for the purpose of making the hole play tough or play easy for various handicap golfers. But often this is ignored.

**Directioning tees**

Too many amateurs (and a few architects who shouldn’t be) make mistakes designing tees, leaving them so that the front tees are not facing down the fairway. Although this normally does not bother the low-handicap golfer, it is amazing how many of the high-handicap golfers will tee up facing in the wrong direction. This stems from the fact that many golfers will unconsciously line up with the right hand edge of the tee (if they are right handed), or perpendicular to the front line of the tee. And if these lines are not correctly placed with regard to the center line of the hole, the player will often line up incorrectly and hit his shot to one side or the other. Therefore, it is very important that the front half or front third of the tees be so built that the players will be given a chance to line up properly. The back half of the tee, usually accommodating the lower-handicap player, can be in any direction as this type of player should be able to line himself up properly regardless of circumstances.

Jimmy Demaret once told me the answer: “Make all the tees round — then they are all facing correctly.” On the other hand, nothing is more monotonous than a long, rectangular tee, especially when it exists on every hole. Tees should be made to blend into the landscape, particularly in rolling or hilly areas. Even in flat areas, a good golf course architect can make irregular tees which are interesting to the eye and still easy to maintain. The shrubbery or trees accompanying the teeing area also must be taken into consideration or must be planted for the best effect.

![Diagram](image-url)