

**I** recently attended a media day for yet another pricey golf course currently under construction. They invited us so we could fawn over the architect and ask banal questions. We certainly weren't supposed to challenge anyone with tough questions about the course.

Somehow, a heretic found his way into our midst. One of the photographers looked at a map of the design and, in an alarmed tone, asked how a course could be a par 72 and only 6,935 yards long from the back tees — as if the course was suffering from a life-threatening disease.

"Oh, we've got it over 7,000 now," the marketing person reassured us.

I felt a migraine emerge and claw its way from the back of my head forward. That credibility only comes to a course with a back-tee yardage over 7,000 remains one of the most ridiculous notions in modern golf. Though some say there has been a return to classic styles in golf course architecture, this so-called renaissance still ignores the fact that courses are considered great because of their original design features, not their length.

But golf marketers perpetuate the "7,000-yard or bust" mentality. Americans have been duped into believing a new course is only worthwhile if it is a par 72, 7,000-yard behemoth.

The 7,000-yard plateau plagues golf the same way multipurpose sports fields bedeviled unsuspecting sports fans in the 1970s. Instead of being temples to professional athletics, stadiums in places like Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, San Diego and Philadelphia devolved into catch-all venues that could host a rock concert as easily as a no-hitter — and sucked the character out of the games played there.

Thankfully, baseball is enjoying a rebirth with its newest ballparks, while multipurpose stadiums are on their way out. Instead, quirkier, more intimate parks are in. Now virtually every major league team is looking to replace its current stadium because fans are flocking to these charming ballparks with distinct personalities.

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## Banish the Blasted 7,000-Yard Norm

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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past evades golf. We have a greater understanding of the classic courses than ever, but there's still a myth that only courses that reach certain lengths deserve the sobriquet "championship quality." What hogwash.

The top five courses in America are the same in the three most popular Top 100 rankings. They are Pebble Beach, Cypress Point, Augusta National, Shinnecock Hills and Pine Valley. Incidentally, these courses have an average back-tee yardage of 6,768 yards.

It's true that the ball is going longer than ever. But a course can still reach championship levels by focusing on the thinking element of the game rather than yardage. Golf needs to follow baseball's lead and incorporate the irregularity and quirkiness of the old courses. The focus should be on a variety of holes with an emphasis on the return of at least two short, do-or-die par-4s per 18 holes.

C.B. Macdonald summed up the numbers obsession in 1928: "No real lover of golf with artistic understanding would undertake to measure the quality or fascination of a golf hole by a yardstick, any more than a critic of poetry would attempt to measure the supreme sentiment expressed in a poem by the same method. One can understand the meter, but one cannot measure the soul expressed. It is absolutely inconceivable."

C.B. had it right back then, and it still holds true today. A golf course should unfold like a good poem, revealing its beauty hole by hole instead of forcing itself to meet an imaginary yardage standard. If we keep this up, golf courses will gain in length, but the game will most certainly lose its soul.

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