

BRUCE STANLEY reports on the activities of one golf club determined to ease the curse of slow play



Tackling

FRUSTRATION

Slow play, as at many other clubs, has been a contentious issue for Lyneham Golf Club in Oxfordshire since the course initially opened a little over two years ago. Now, at the approach of the first anniversary of the completion of the clubhouse and all 18 holes, positive steps are being taken to eliminate the problem for the benefit of players and the greenkeeping staff alike.

"There is little doubt that slow play is one of the greatest single frustrations on most courses in the country," commented general manager, Neil Biggs. "We appreciate that it is not unique to Lyneham but, being a new club, we are determined to nip the problem in the bud before members and visitors become set in their ways."

The result will, he hopes, improve not just the pleasure of playing a round at this scenic course, but enable the green staff to carry out their work with fewer hold-ups or interruptions.

Lyneham Golf Club is situated in the gently rolling Evenlode Valley, midway between Burford and Chipping Norton. Created out of former farmland, it covers 144 acres, measuring 6,808 yards with a par of 72. The club is privately owned by a founding board of directors, with both membership and 'pay and play' facilities open to the general public. In less than a year, membership has grown to almost 700, making the course very busy at weekends, public holidays and during fine weather.

"The problem of slow play was first drawn to the attention of members in a newsletter more than 12 months ago," explained Mr Biggs. "However, the ever increasing demand for golf brought matters to a head at the end of last year. Quite simply, we had to take urgent steps to speed up throughput which, at certain times, was painfully slow."

A letter, sent to all members in early January, spelled out the measures being implemented by the club. They include:

- Better management of tee time bookings to avoid a two ball match following a group of four balls. Members and visitors are made aware of the matches booked ahead of them and advised that it may be better to start at a different time. If a two ball match still insists on following a four ball, the players are asked to refrain from complaining if held up! Anyone booking a weekend morning start is recommended to make up a four ball. If unable, then the club will attempt to do it for them if necessary.

- Competitions to be better managed with entries being taken up to 14 days in advance. All matches will be played in three balls and made up 'selectively' by the club's secretary. No other matches will be booked during the times between the first and last players in a competition teeing off.

- The course to be patrolled at all busy times by members of the club's staff. They will carry a list of teeing-off times for each group and will insist on play being speeded up if one group is falling behind. To this end, the directors have drawn up guide-

lines with regard to the acceptable times for a typical four ball match to reach specified points around the course. These times are being posted on prominent signs alongside the 4th, 7th, 10th, 13th and 16th tees, with a guide-line time of 3 hours 40 minutes for the match to be back in the clubhouse. Two and three ball matches should be even quicker!

- Other measures include making one player responsible for the speed of play, and course etiquette, in his or her match; restricting start times for visitors until after 10.30am at weekends; and using a first tee starter during busy periods.

Neil Biggs commented that the process was principally one of education and that more experienced players were equally as likely as beginners to be responsible for slow play. "Our letter states that there is only so much that the club can do. The rest is down to the players," he said.

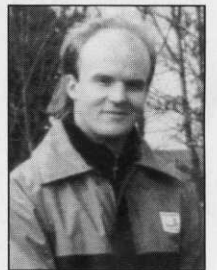
Guidance given to golfers includes being ready to play a shot immediately the way ahead is clear; keeping up with the match in front, rather than simply just ahead of the match behind, while being prepared to invite a faster match through; walking briskly between shots; clearing the green quickly when the last player has holed out; and being aware that in a friendly game or matchplay, there is no need to hole out on every occasion.

The result of the letter has been a 'dramatic improvement', pointed out club secretary, Cyril Howkins. "Players are now thinking and talking about the time taken to complete a round and even apologising if they exceed our guide-line times by a few minutes, promising to do better next time," he said.

And what of the greenkeeping benefits? "It can be painful at times watching a four ball putt out," comments head greenkeeper, John Heslip. "If we just happen also to be working on that green, there can be a great deal of wasted time waiting for the match to play through. I'm hopeful that the steps taken will lead to less interruptions, less waiting and increased safety on all parts of the course."

The club insists that no ball is played to a green while the flag is out. However, this has not always prevented frustrated players firing a 'warning shot' at a greenkeeper or slow-moving match ahead. The same applies on the fairway. "We do all we can to stay clear of matches," said John. "However, the demand for golf means that there are many times when we have to work in harmony with the golfers. It needs give and take on both sides, but if all players moved along a little quicker, having repaired their pitch marks and replaced their divots, it would make our job easier and eliminate much of the wasted time we spend on the course."

■ The editor will be pleased to hear from readers with views - different, unique or downright controversial - on ways of speeding up play. The best ideas will be published.



John Heslip, head greenkeeper at Lyneham Golf Club: 'Slow play causes frustration among players and green staff alike'