

Golf & the Fight for Discretionary Dollars

by Gregory E. Martin
Martin Design Partnership, Ltd.

Let's face it: there's a battle going on and it's raging into a war. There is a fight over discretionary dollars, the consumer's extra money. This isn't a battle just within the friendly confines of the golf industry, it is being waged throughout the globe with theme parks, theater, movies, resorts/vacations and cruises, music and even Nintendo. While golf has been fortunate of late, this war may ravage a proud and recently successful industry. Therefore, it is necessary to be flexible during the coming times of change.

This is the era of the televised championship medal play on Tournament of Players Championship courses. As viewers and participants, we are convinced that the only measure of a golfer's ability is from the most difficult course in the area. Why is it that each week thousands of golfers subject themselves to the back tees on 7,000 yd. courses with slope ratings bulging to 145? In a world where careers, families, and the evening news is stressful, the game of golf should not be painful: life is challenging enough. Golf should be promoted and developed to be more 'recreational', not more difficult. Golfers want service, price, quality and maintenance. Most importantly, however, golfers want to play a golf course that will test their skill.

All too often a golf course is valued by difficulty and length. There may be no substitution for length, but to overemphasize its merit has unfortunately and unfairly discriminated against some of the most beautiful and challenging shorter courses. The most notable golf courses in the world, Pebble Beach, St. Andrews, Augusta National and Cypress Point vary in length from 6,500 yds. to 7,000 yards, yet each has the ability to create options, no matter what the ball position. These great courses challenge the mental aspects of the game and support the notion that difficulty does not encourage skill and finesse, it demands talent. Playable courses filled with options are favorable. Harder is not necessarily better and skill is far different than strength.

Too often the design of a golf course begins with creating length and imposing difficulty. Designs are stretched past recreation, challenge and mental stimulation to punishment. The design of a golf course should begin with recreation for the middle to high handicap golfer and then implement difficulty where appropriate for the better golfer. National Golf Foundation analysis indicates that less than 20% of the population shoots under 90 on a consistent basis, yet many layouts of the past decade demand "my way or no way". Architects and those responsible for renovation should keep in mind that 73% of the rounds played are by 25% of the golfing population. It is clear that a facility should seek the higher frequency golfer.

Golfers are nomadic by nature, testing and trying new venues as they are opened. The courses that meet the quality, service and challenge demands of the high frequency golfer will ultimately win the "discretionary dollars". To produce a layout or implement improvements that encourage the golfer

to return, the course design should provide the following three key elements:

First, the course should be planned so that it is recreationally challenging for all abilities. This will surely expand the use of the facility and raise the potential for economic viability. Multiple tees, varied hazard locations, limited forced carries, forgiving fairways and accessible/puttable greens all account for playable layouts. Ironically, making the course difficult is easy and expensive. Difficult layouts for junior, senior, women or high handicap play will, in fact slow play and reduce the chance for repeat play. Good golf course design should entice the golfer to return.

Second, the course should be visually appealing and designed to enhance the surrounding landscape, not dominate it. The layout should be blended into the site using native features and culture. The seaside links of the British Isles don't try to hide the windblown dunes and the 'culture' of the parkland courses in southern England are vastly different than the desert courses of the southwestern United States. In other words, capitalize upon your local culture and landscape. The economic life of the golf course is hinged upon simplified construction and long term maintenance costs.

We cannot diminish the positive impact of the elaborate designs of the 1980's from renowned architects such as Dye, Nicklaus, Jones, Fazio and others. These architects and their designs have impacted the industry forever with highly visual, demanding layouts capable of bringing the best golfers in the world to their knees. But golf course architecture is moving toward simpler designs. Minimalist golf course architecture is a positive trend that will help ensure the long term success of the industry with sustainable landscapes. A return to "soft-handed" designs with less intrusive construction will reduce maintenance, irrigation and construction costs while, simultaneously, promoting play to a wider range of the golfing public through lower fees.

Third and finally, golf, by definition, has varying fields of play and this sport was historically played under match play conditions. Therefore, golf courses should be measured less against one another and more upon its ability to challenge a golfer under match play conditions. If this can be accomplished, golf course architects will feel less compelled to stretch a course to 7,000 yards, routing courses that fit the land, requiring less invasive construction. Golfers and the golf industry should look less at the length and difficulty of a golf course and more at how the course mentally challenges and stimulates the golfer.

The design of a golf course is a compelling process. Some of the most appealing courses in the world have evolved from nature's handiwork. The presence of a golf course will have a profound effect on the local quality of life and environment for generations of golfers, providing open space and recreation. Facilities need to be prepared for the coming challenge for discretionary dollars and golf course architects need to recognize that harder may not be better: that the economic and environmental life of a golf course may rest with sustainable, less intrusive layouts that encourage the golfer to return.

