

Length and Design

"The object of golf architecture is to give intelligent purpose to the striking of a golf ball." –Max Behr

Each day, we hear more and more talk about length, the professional game and their impact on the golf course industry. These are necessary discussions, for it is here that golf begins to establish its identity for the next generation of golfers. In fact, golf is at a crossroads. There are parts of the golf industry that want golf to be about equipment, length and longer, tougher golf course design. There is another part of the industry that is tugging to gain back golf's soul. You needn't look any farther than the success of Bandon Dunes. Golf desires to be more intimate, more appealing, more open and engaging.

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The fascination with length is never more apparent than each week as we watch the handiwork of the PGA Tour. Longer, more demanding and narrower golf courses present the best golfers with the next challenge. How these golf courses stack up is not the question, rather, the question is: How are these facilities, players and equipment impacting the game? The race for the next, longest and toughest golf course continues. I will leave that race to those who are willing to run it.

Interestingly, I recently heard about plans for a new golf course in Illinois. This new facility will augment an existing golf course and be designed by a touring professional. The plans call for an 8,200-yard golf course including 600-yard par 5s and par 4s measuring no less than 450 yards. While intriguing, this facility will leave a smear on the game and Chicagoland golf for decades.

The pursuit of length is a byproduct of the aim of "protecting par" and continues while the rest of the golf course industry struggles to accommodate their existing clientele. The current generation of golfer has high expectations, less time, more choices and coincidentally, can hit the ball farther. So an 8,000-yard golf course, while a seemingly appropriate novelty, will do nothing but distort an industry that needs simplification. Certainly, some golfers will be intrigued enough to try it once, maybe twice, or maybe even make it their home course.

In fact, this golf course may go on to have architectural significance with wonderful entertainment value. It may be a boon for the Village and become a huge economic success. I doubt it. In fact, even if the above holds true, the repercussions will be significant and notorious. Like a tattoo, it will be a regretful reminder and it can only be removed [or transformed] with painful and expensive surgery. Golf is a multidimensional game: horizontal, vertical and "between the ears." The constant fascination for length on a golf course will only melt the beauty, charm and spirit off of golf's bones, leaving a bare, naked skeleton left for play. Golfers who are brutalized will not return. So what's the point?

A recent study on "What Golfers Want" indicated the preferences and expectations of 18,400 golfers. This is the most widespread and comprehensive study of its kind. There were interesting, but not surprising, results. For instance:

- Most golfers prefer to play golf courses that are shorter than those presently being designed.
- Golfers overestimated the distance they drive the ball . . . by 30 yards!
- Time, cost and money are the three most important factors that cause golfers to give up the game.
- Current golf course design is catering to a fractional percentage of the golfing population.

I have a solution . . . Forget about length and limit the need to "protect"

par. Allow a golf course to be defensible with strategy, not length. These are matters of intelligent design and purpose. A.W. Tillinghast may have said it best with: "The merit of any hole is not judged by its length but rather by its interest and its variety as elective play is apparent. It isn't how far, but how good!"

In fact, the design of a golf course has more to do with thought than any other component. Difficulty and length is rather easy to design. To create an engaging and inspirational facility is quite challenging. Does your golf course have a personality and an allure? Does it tempt and engage? Not once, but every day? Does it create "lines of charm," as Alister Mackenzie stated? Does it challenge a low handicap while engaging an average golfer? Does it hold interest and require skill, or does it demand brute strength? Does it yield to wisdom while providing for talent? Does it reward cleverness?

The race for length and difficulty will continue. I will have none of it. We as golfers, architects, superintendents, golf professionals and club members, all need to stand and resist the lure of "length."

It is my promise to construct golf courses that are filled with variety, beauty and balance; build golf holes that are thoughtful, engaging and inspiring that require intelligence, wit, skill and execution; design golf courses that are meaningful for the game and fun for golfers of all abilities, not monuments for any specific golfer, individual or demand. Golf holes should be reviewed based upon their ability to provide for strategic, consistent and compelling match play while allowing for an honest treatment of the land. For, if there is no intelligent purpose to the striking of a golf ball, then there is no golf architecture and the game will not grow.



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