

Does Your Course's Teeing System Make Sense?

If tee boxes could talk, they would likely sound like the late comedian Rodney Dangerfield: They don't get no respect. This has something to do with not being as photogenic, as varied, as "sexy" as greens, bunkers and other elements of golf course architecture. Commentators during the recent U.S. Open Championship couldn't stop talking about Pinehurst No. 2's turtle-shell-contoured putting surfaces and elaborate green complexes. But, having logged my share of tube time watching the event, I recall almost no pearls of wisdom concerning tee placements, beyond the observation that, like most classic courses, No. 2's tee boxes tend to be relatively close to the preceding green.

Fair enough, except that for all us non-Open players, tee placement and maintenance are immensely important to strategy and—more important in this “let’s-grow-the-game” era—in attracting and retaining new and infrequent players, who tend by definition to be less accomplished. So while I’m not surprised that Pinehurst’s greens are the story of the tournament, I am frequently amazed at how little understanding and attention the tee box system receives from owners and managers who should know better. And though the reasons for this lack of regard may vary, it seems to apply across the spectrum of facilities: public and private, high-end daily fee, muni, you name it.

An unreconstructed perspective on tee box options may even be deliberate, rather than inadvertent, as a noted national golf course rater once explained to me. Having often encountered resistance to the suggested additions or alterations to various courses’ network of tee boxes, he noted that this reluctance was usually explained not as stubbornness but as devotion to the game’s traditions: “Our tees haven’t changed in a quarter of a century. Why would we do it now?” Sadly, as the rater also noted, such a defense of the faith generally coincides with a decline in rounds played at pay-for-play courses, a struggle to retain members at private clubs.

During my two decades as a practicing golf course architect, examples of faulty tee design and placement have come in innumerable forms. But it is fair to classify the vast majority into five significant problem areas, as follows.

1. Failure to include forward tee options suitable for beginners and high-handicap golfers.
2. Inadequate matching of teeing options with the variety of regular players at the course, public or private, in question.
3. Angles of play that impede rather than promote the course’s strategic attractions, especially “risk/reward” options.
4. Sight lines that fail to capitalize on design elements, natural or manmade.
5. Teeing areas that make maintenance difficult or impossible due to size, location or composition.

Fortunately, there is a flipside to the relative lack of attention devoted to the tee box’s contribution to the playing experience, namely that all the above are also comparatively easy to fix. In most cases, it is a lot easier and less costly to rebuild a tee box than a green.

Like much of golf course architecture, a good tee box system has much to do with common sense.

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1. Failure to include forward tee options suitable for beginners and high-handicap golfers.

Though the guilty party shall remain nameless, one of my recent projects—at a respected private club in the Great Lakes region—illustrates the point. Asked to make suggestions on the remodeling of a couple of discrete areas on the course, my first recommendation didn't even require a site visit: A look at the scorecard revealed that the forward-most tees played more than 5,800 yards. When I questioned two club officials about the length, they replied with obvious pride, "We have always wanted to ensure that our club is very challenging from all tees, even the forward ones." The irony here is that they had contacted me in the face of difficulty in attracting new members, especially juniors and the families who had been the core of their membership and were now the object of a roster-building campaign.

Of course, the club's target market is similar to that of the game generally. But as obtuse as the point may seem, novice golfers, like high-handicappers, need a realistic challenge. Personally, I like to see courses offer a forward tee that can be played between 4,800 and 5,300 yards, depending on other variables affecting the design decision; and favorable reaction from clients, both private and public, confirms that golfers welcome the practice. Player enjoyment, not some arbitrary concept of a "stern test," ought to be the guiding principle.

Indeed, where possible and appropriate to the clientele, I also recommend that courses offer a "young junior" set of tees for beginning golfers, pre-teens and super seniors that can be played at about 3,500 yards. Usually, it is unnecessary to build permanent tees for this golfing population, as moveable tee markers, placed along the edge of the fairway, with play limited to certain days and times, will suffice. The sense of making these tees "official" can be instilled by printing a separate scorecard—a nice touch.

Again, it sounds elementary but—take it from a guy whose job is to visit lots of golf courses—the scarcity of playable forward tees is a pervasive, industry-wide problem. And it is important enough to beginners and high-handicappers to represent a crucial impediment to expanding participation in golf.

2. Inadequate matching of teeing options with variety of regular players at the course, public or private, in question.

The existing teeing system of a public course at which I recently consulted exhibited another common flaw. In this case, the scorecard described the four tee selections thus:

Blue tee = 6,950
White tee = 6,750
Gold tee = 5,950
Red tee = 5,200

Plainly, what was needed was a middle teeing option measuring roughly 6,300 yards. This, despite the owner's acknowledgement that complaints from patrons regularly had to do with the course playing either too long or too short; and that among these complaints, most came from golfers playing the white or gold tees, seldom from those playing the blues or the reds, that is, the longest and shortest sets of tees. The topography at the course in question will make the addition of a new set of tees easy—which begs the question of why it wasn't done before. But ask yourself: How many courses have you played where the first review of the scorecard revealed the need for a "missing tee?"

Similarly, the differentials between multiple tee placements can appear to have no rhyme or reason. Absolute, constant proportionality—10 percent increments in yardage, say, between one tee and the next one farther back or forward—are seldom possible on every hole, due to pre-existing landforms that make such a rigid scheme implausible. Still, it's surprisingly often the case that no semblance of proportionality exists, thereby negating the fundamental purpose of multiple tees—to equalize the golf experience for players at all levels of competence.

3. Angles of play that impede rather than promote the course's strategic attractions, especially "risk/reward" options.

A cousin of tee design shortcoming #2 ignores another strategic aspect useful in making a round of golf both exciting and manageable for a variety of players. It is to make tee shots easier or more difficult according to their angles, not just the distances involved, particularly those involving forced carries.

For example, last year I consulted with a very prominent golf course in upstate New York whose four-tee-box system unfortunately made absolutely no sense. On many holes, the attack angle associated with a hazard or hazards located near landing areas turned the risk/reward formula on its head: Instead of emphasizing forgiveness from the forward tees, it was the back tees that offered more spacious "bail-out" areas.

Worse than the tee placements themselves, though, was that many of the forward tees were actually angled toward trouble—a more egregious design and construction flaw than a less-than-ideal tee location. As I hope my recommendations made clear, however, such defects are fairly inexpensive and straightforward to remedy.


4. Sight lines that fail to capitalize on design elements, natural or manmade.

As many noted golf course architects have observed, a golf course's setting, its purely "cosmetic" aspect, is key to the golfer's appreciation of the experience, and this is even more true of the average player than the scratch player, who may be interested primarily in his ball-striking. It is often possible to maximize tee-box vistas without seriously jeopardizing "shot values" or other strategic aspects associated with playing the course. Many times, in fact, all that is entailed is to move a tee box laterally, typically 10 to 25 feet. As a designer, I know this has worked when someone says, "Wow, I never really appreciated the view on this hole. The scenery in the distance is beautiful."

5. Teeing areas that make maintenance difficult or impossible due to size, location or composition.

Most golfers would cite canted tee box surfaces, threadbare turf and other defects as proof positive of inattentiveness on the part of management; and while this is sometimes a valid complaint, some tee box configurations simply cannot be maintained adequately regardless of the expertise and dedication of the greenkeeping staff. Many times this is attributable simply to the tee box's size, or lack thereof, which leads to excessive wear from player use. A tee box that is too big is a problem both vastly less common and less serious.


With all the attention greens receive in terms of soil testing, I would venture to guess that about 60-70 percent of courses I have visited have tees that contain a soil mix incapable of proper drainage and turf nourishment. The solution is to analyze the soil mix using a USGA-approved testing lab. If soil quality is the problem, the solution is to rectify it through deep aeration and aggressive topdressing or rebuild the tees using proper tee mix. Other problems plaguing healthy tees are restricted access routes, excessive shade, root problems from trees, inadequate sprinkler coverage and poor turfgrass choices.

Like much of golf course architecture, a good tee box system has much to do with common sense. But as elementary as all of this sounds, the five points listed above will resonate with many, even most, golf course decision-makers. And the issues may be simple, but their resolution is far from trivial in the pursuit of new members or the golfing public at large. A good place to start is to consult a golf course architect to discuss potential areas of improvement. Your tees still can't talk, but your customers will thank you. 

Recognizing Our 2005 Scholarship Winners . . . (continued from page 36)

teer, you give others the chance to have a valuable life and the chance for their dreams to come true. Whether you spend 30 minutes a week reading with a child, or 20 hours a week building a house for a family, your actions motivate those you are helping and give them the confidence and courage that they need to achieve their own goals in life. For many people, volunteers are the only ones that they can count on. As a volunteer, I helped third graders at a local ele-

mentary school improve their reading. Some of them did not have anybody at home who could help them learn to read. They did not like to read, because it was hard for them. After a couple of months, not only were these kids reading above their grade level, but they were looking forward to my visits. They could not wait to finish their books so that they could start new ones. This is why it is important to give up your time to volunteer. The impact you have will

encourage those who were helped by volunteers to volunteer themselves. Then, someday, they will have that same impact on somebody else. If this trend continues, many more people will be able to achieve their dreams and live more fulfilled lives. 



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