



Golf's DNA

In an article published in 1989, Frank Hannigan, Former Senior Executive Director of the USGA, said, "....the motives for building golf courses are different. There is a conflict between the profit motive and excellent golf." This statement is extraordinary in its implication as well as prophetic. This assertion was made at the beginning of the "second golden age of architecture." His assessment reveals how golf had changed.

Since the 1950s, golf has been transformed into a fuzzy likeness of the game that was born on the shores of Scotland. A generation of golfers, spellbound by Nicklaus and Palmer, Augusta and TPC, fast greens and Tiger, established new expectations for the game of golf: a perception that quality golf is defined by spectacular maintenance, ratings, yardage, par, slope, or some other classification.

A tectonic shift had occurred. Golf had become a stroke play game, leaving the less television appropriate Match Play format. Because of this, and to challenge the world's best golfers, Master Golf Course Architect Robert Trent Jones Senior issued a game-altering, industry-changing proclamation when he stated: "My job is to protect par!"

Par now governs the game.

Because the game now uses par as its basis, the genetic makeup of the game has mutated. Because of par, the game of golf has morphed into a game of "fairness," "challenge," and the color green (money and turf). Expectations in every sector of the industry, from owners to operators and golfers alike, have been driven by television and have altered the game.

Golf course architects have responded with more challenging, diabolical, deliberately difficult, and maintenance intensive layouts in an effort to attract and challenge the better, more frequent golfer. Because the battle is against an artificially imposed standard (par), golf course architecture devotes considerable attention to protecting it. Maintenance practices escalate to provide for par-saving fairness. The attention given to par has resulted in golf courses that attract an ever-contracting market.



All in the name of par.

Once upon a time, match play determined the best golfers. With match play, the golfer battled the opponent and played the course. This was a duel - a match of wits and will played out across the landscape. The less able golfer had options and alternatives for combating the longer, more aggressive golfer. Match play golfers weren't consumed with fairness, because the 'rub' affected everyone without prejudice. The opponent was the competition, not the golf course. Match play golfers didn't fight the golf course: they played the opponent, using creativity, cleverness and ingenuity. The golf course allowed for – even supplied bad luck. The golf game was the match, not the score.

Submission to par has shaped a generation of golfers now accustomed to stroke play. The entire industry is now defined by it. Because of stroke play: fairness is a prerequisite and maintenance requirements soar; score is mandatory, so golf takes too long to play; golf is too expensive because maintenance and construction costs require "equity;" and golf is less fun because par must be defended. Because of par, numbers now define the game. The game has changed.

The golf industry has witnessed remarkable growth and transformation, but little has changed in the game itself. Golf is about golfers and the wondrous places we play – the simple interaction of man and nature with friends, family or competitors. It appears that the game of golf has undergone a genetic mutation. Golf has evolved, and the effects are astounding.

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Golf has changed, but solutions to the problems facing our industry are evident. The future of golf is in its original DNA.

1. Golf is not fair

If we are to save this industry, we need to focus on the game – as it was intended. Right now we are too fixed to stroke play and its standards, rules, and regulations. All of this was intended to make the game fairer. Don't kid yourself - this game is not fair. Golf is like life, and life isn't fair. Bad things can happen and probably do. Risk is inherent in the game. The true magic of this game is how golfers react to the rub.

The instinct to make it fair has only made it more complicated and more expensive.

What if the golf industry forgot about length and its preoccupation with protecting par? What if designers were encouraged to defend a golf course with strategy, not distance or hazards? What if golf courses were judged on the merits of their design strategies, shot values, and a match play perspective instead of maintenance, slope values, or length? Golf would have a more wide-ranging appeal. If we reduce the impact of par, we can resuscitate the game by improving the pace of play, reducing the impact of hazards, promoting strategy, and, most importantly, encouraging a new generation of golfers.



2. Golf is about golfers

Golf is not about The PGA, waterfalls, par, length, gps systems, clubhead speed, launch angle, or stroke play. Golf is about golfers. Golfers want to play, but for whatever reason, we have not provided the customer with what is needed. Let's be clear: what golfers want, and what golfers need are two different things. Golfers say they want challenge – let's give them fun. Golfers want entertainment – but that means being engaged. Golfers want superior maintenance – but only if it doesn't cost anything. Golfers want fair – unless it's unfair to the opponent. Golfers want excitement – but that translates to enjoyment.

Like the big three automakers the golf industry has not reacted to global shifts in costs, consumer needs, wants, or expectations. An industry strategy based on size, aesthetic, or marketing is not sustainable. As Frank Hannigan implied, this has become a "fashion-first" industry.

We have focused on the product and the brand, the style, the sale and profit, not the customer. Decisions about design, operations, and maintenance must be developed with a more pragmatic viewpoint.

This may sound populist. So be it. These ideas are based in time-tested design philosophies; they are based in the soul of the game. Golfers want to play – let 'em.

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3. Golf is an adventure

Adventure is defined as: an activity that comprises risky, dangerous and uncertain experiences.... Adventurous activities are typically undertaken for the purposes of recreation or excitement.

The human experience is tied to adventure. Golf provides a small opportunity for that man-nature experience. By ensuring fairness, the game becomes less adventurous. My favorite golf adventure was in Scotland, where you are expected to play golf! That means play the ball as it lies, up, down and sideways. The fun of the game was not in the score, but in the imagination that was called upon to invent shots from those implausible lies. This was far beyond fun: this was an adventure.

Golf is better when the conditions are challenging. Golf is better when you are tested. The best golf courses are those that provide the most distinct and unique golf adventures. They reveal your character and the land, simultaneously. This industry needs less standardization and more variety, more adventure and less calibration, more that is unique and less duplication.

4. Golf is about nature

We live in an age where everything around us is a digital replication of the original. Everything has been reduced to 1s and 0s. The digital age is here to stay. I can find music, news, books, movies or television right here on my phone. I don't have to go anywhere!

Golf offers an alternative. Golf is a respite - it is the opposite of digital. Implicit in this is the fact that golf is an escape from the wired world. It is an environmental encounter, a man-nature interaction - not a product of, or excuse for technology. Golf should be seen as unplugging from the digital world to recharge. Golf is not a man vs. nature contest: it is a man-nature encounter. Golf is the remedy for the digital distraction.

5. All golf is local

Golf industry insiders, like lobbyists in Washington, have driven the game. GOLF has been governed by marketing, definition, standardization, uniformity and promotion. Industry expectations have had a sobering effect that has led to increased costs and fewer returning golfers.

Golf is not about any measure, whether it's length, par, or slope. Nor is it about titanium, signature holes, or branding, much less someone's "objective" rating system. Golf is about golfers and the game is about your home course. Your home course is the fertile ground to grow the game and ensure survival. Effort should be focused on the needs of the golfing community, from junior programs to senior leagues, and everything in between.

Golf needs to support initiatives that grow the game within the community. Kids, juniors, women, and novices should be given maximum access with minimum cost to expose potential golfers to the game. The game will support itself if given the opportunity.

More importantly, golf has benefits that reach beyond its borders. We should make sure our customers and non-customers, golfers, and those who look down on the game understand the cultural, environmental, and recreational value of golf.

Like the auto industry, we should be focusing on better engineering and more efficient models, on sustainability, stewardship, and economic sense.

6. Golf is Match Play

The game was borne from the links of Scotland – golfer against golfer. My six beat your seven. Ha!

What if our expectations about golf were reintroduced to the simple premise that golf is Match Play? Would golfers play faster? Would we enjoy the game differently? Play the course differently? Enjoy the surroundings differently?

Certainly, the emphasis on match play would provide more strategic designs and less demand for longer golf courses. Match play would increase the pace of play because score is less important. Match play would moderate the need for contrived beauty and stress naturalized environments. Match play would lower maintenance expectations. Match play would celebrate originality, variety, and diminish the need for "fair".

I am inspired to produce more golf courses that are filled with variety, beauty, and balance; golf holes that are thoughtful, engaging, and inspiring to every class of golfer; that require intelligence, wit, skill, and execution; golf courses that are meaningful for the game and fun for golfers of all ability, not monuments to difficulty, a specific golfer, individual, or demand. Golf holes should be conceived to improve the strategic instinct - compelling engaging match play while allowing for an honest treatment of the land.

Harry Colt, a "Golden Age Master Architect" said, "Immediately when we attempt to standardize sizes, shapes, and distances, we lose more than half the pleasure of the game." The foundation of par does just that – it reduces the game to standards. Golf cannot afford to be standardized. We must appreciate the basic gifts of the game and reorient our expectations.

Accommodating golfers with engaging courses and operations that foster adjusted expectations will inspire a new generation of players while saving our environment. Like the auto industry, we should be focusing on better engineering and more efficient models, on sustainability, stewardship, and economic sense. There is a distinct opportunity now to promote and illustrate how golf has benefits that stretch far beyond its boundaries.

Golf has a future, but it is not rooted in Tiger Woods, signature design, branding, technology, standardization, or marketing. Its future is based in its DNA. **-OC**