

FEATURE I

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Ratings and Rankings: Let's Start by Stopping

I am fortunate to have played a lot of golf on a lot of golf courses. I have played many, but not all, of the courses considered to be the 'best.' Certainly, I have my favorites, and my impulse tells me to rate and rank those courses. I have attempted this on countless occasions, but with little success.

Many of my favorites are just that – my favorites. Not because of any rating, but because of numerous intangible and personal responses to those golf experiences. My favorites might not stack up against your top choice and viceversa. I ask myself, “How then can we possibly apply objective ratings to a golf course?” More importantly, can or should we, or the industry, even try to rate or rank any golf course?

Ratings

Today's ratings and rankings are intended to provide specific measures, standards that provide comparison. These include: resistance to scoring, memorability, aesthetics, walking, par, yardage and slope, condition, as well as historical factors such as championships hosted. The average golfer accepts rankings as objective determinations. They are not. Many are wholly subjective. For instance, can the beauty of Pebble Beach or Cypress Point be objectively measured against the simplicity of Shinnecock Hills or the stunning landforms at Bandon Dunes? Isn't each equally spectacular within its setting and treatment?

I would submit that the top 20, 30, or maybe 50 courses in the country are just that...the best. Beyond that, differences become so slight as to be indistinguishable. There are probably as many as 200 courses, maybe more, that could be given consideration as the next best. The difference between #50 and #250 isn't measurable, other than by someone's less than impartial review, or personal perception of beauty, condition, or shot-making on any given day.

Moreover, great maintenance is significant, but can it or should it distinguish equally great golf courses on any specific day? Can an average golfer/rater really measure condition? One golfer may want plush, another may want 'firm and fast.' Without an understanding of budget, soil conditions, staff, weather cycles, or ownership expectations how can condition be judged fairly and objectively or with any consistency? Further, as Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw said, “If immaculate conditions are necessary for a great golf experience, then the golf course is flawed.” I agree.

Rankings

The restaurant industry, by comparison, doesn't use this system. Fantastic cuisine and dining is defined within broader classifications (Five Stars, or Four Stars, etc.), mostly because it is impossible to establish fair comparisons in the diversity of 'bread and circus' experiences that modern restaurants provide. Restaurant ratings distinguish great from good and average, but rankings do not exist.

Why do we place such import on yardage and challenge? No one would attempt to compare restaurants based upon how many tables are provided or how many choices there are on the menu. Do larger portions rate high for an excellent dining experience? Each dining experience is unique: menus are different and ambiance is distinctive. As a result, experiences cannot be compared. Evaluations focus on comparable value, experience, and execution. Golf should do the same.

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The pursuit of higher ratings has accelerated the race for yardage, challenge, higher maintenance expense, and artificial beauty. All of these cost money, increase time of play, and increase maintenance and play costs. The basic measuring devices seem antiquated. More succinctly, these devices have created an unsustainable industry. These standards are inadequate for determining the most insightful works or the best golf. Both individual golfers and the industry have taken these rankings as doctrine. They are not. These rankings do little for the industry, and less for golfers.

Developers, architects and operators use these standards and lists in an attempt to distinguish their product. But the outcome is the opposite. More and more golf courses look alike. Because rating systems are inherently flawed they continue to damage an industry searching for clarity and direction. Golfers should be encouraged to enjoy and revel in their own unique and personal appraisals of the golf courses they play. This has less to do with 'number crunching' and more to do with understanding the distinctiveness of a golf course, its landscape, its inherent beauty, the resultant golf course design treatment, and a personal connection.

Yes, this is subjective...as it should be. Golf is a subjective experience. Objectivity has nothing to do with golf, just as fairness has nothing to do with play. Let's frame the significance of a golf course toward 'meaning, value, and authenticity.'

Keep in mind these three simple appraisals when playing a golf course:

- Is it Meaningful? – Max Behr said “The object of golf architecture is to give an intelligent purpose to the striking of a golf ball.” Is the golf course an evocative, uplifting, and engaging golf experience? Does it provide memorable and distinct golf holes? Is it playable, challenging, and strategic? Does it make you think...and tempt you to execute a variety of shots? And maybe most importantly, is it FUN?

- Does it have Value? – recreationally, culturally, environmentally, or historically?
- Is it Authentic? – Is the golf course true to the site conditions? Does it create an authentic appeal? Stanley Thompson said “Strive to retain as much of the natural ground formation as possible. The most beautiful courses are the ones that hew the most closely to nature.” Do the landforms and landscape treatments highlight and utilize the surrounding landscape? Does it belong in that landscape? Is it beautiful and enriching?

If the answer is yes, more often than not, you have a wonderful golf course. If the answer is yes to all of the above, you are walking on hallowed ground.

Where do we go from here? Let's start by stopping the ratings system and move forward by understanding the value of golf in a more personal light. Golf should be an encounter between the golfer and the golf course, not a prize, trophy, or badge. Dismiss the pervasive standardization of number-numbing ratings and value a golf course based upon its unique ability to engage us with meaning, value, and authenticity. **-OC**