

Slow play crucial to golfers, owners

TV and pros have led many to painstaking sluggishness

BY VERN PUTNEY

Greg Norman and Mark O'Meara last December at Pebble Beach, Calif., made a great run—or brisk walk—at the unofficial time record for 18 holes on the PGA Tour.

However, their mark must be accompanied by an asterisk. They failed the essential element in any golf speed test. Playing faster should mean playing better. Their ballooned scores of 79 each reflected inability to adjust to abrupt change.

In mid-April Norman led the PGA Tour with a 69.21 average, while O'Meara was in sixth place at 70.07.

Norman and O'Meara were at the rear of



last-day qualifiers, so, as a lark, they set off into the sunrise to provide a fine example in a setting notorious for slow play. They sliced five minutes from the 1:29 clocking of tour pros Bill Mallon and Gary McCord, who both shot par in 1976 at the Heritage Classic's Harbour Town Golf Links in Hilton Head Island, S. C.

But Commissioner Deane Beman reprimanded Norman and O'Meara and threatened a fine for making a travesty of the game. The scores refuted that charge.

Since the oh-so-deliberate days of Ralph Guldahl a half-century ago, to the current snail's pace of most Tour players, completing the course in a reasonable hour has been a problem.

Behind the admitted gimmickry and showmanship of exceptionally fast play is a serious theme—how to combat a course condition that has become far more than irritant. It's the game's No. 1 problem and reaches into every facet of the industry.

From the course superintendents' standpoint, the slowpoke foursome becomes a maintenance headache. It's hard to keep work crews on an orderly schedule when there is inordinate congestion in one area, open space in another.

Management has even higher stakes in this course plague. It's money—frequently the difference between club prosperity and insolvency.

The simple economic fact is that the more rounds played, the more revenue. The more golf carts turned around for afternoon play, the more green fees, the healthier a club's financial status.

And fast play—good play is provable.

Contrast Norman and O'Meara's time and scores with a couple of average amateurs from Maine who in August 1963 set out to show the Maine Open field how to move—and score.

Eight handicapper Bill Sears and I, a six-handicapper, set goals of less than an hour and a half for 18 holes, and fewer strokes than combined handicaps—72 times two for 144, plus 14 for 158.

Playing from tourney tees, Sears carded 78. I stumbled in close the last two holes for



bogeys and a 79. Sears wheeled his own bag while I had the luxury of caddie. Total tally was 157. It was as easy as 1:23, the elapsed time.

The message of the next-day story sank in. The field finished well before darkness. Sadly, soon came return of the links laggard.

Faces are new, but the pace is familiar—tortoise slow.

Norman and O'Meara may have had a clearer track than the Riverside pair, but they had to contend with more than just 500 yards of extra territory. The four toughest holes on the 1988 PGA Tour, and seven of the most difficult 17, were at Pebble Beach's three layouts.

Still, too much time is wasted, despite extreme efforts by PGA Tour officials. Tournaments are policed like no others, players are hurried and fined. They must play by the (watched) clock or else.

However, the one thing the Tour has not done is invoke stroke penalties. That's the most significant imposition and the one that would really hurt. It's under consideration.

Is there any solution to this game-threatening situation?

From a background as caddie, caddiemaster, caddie school director, state tournament director, assistant professional, ranger, starter and for 35 years golf chronicler and observer, I offer some suggestions.

Foremost is: Discover the joy of fast play. Golf should be a pleasant and exhilarating experience. It is much more fun when breezing along.

Earl Cushman perhaps was the best example of relaxed and rewarding round. Play-

ing with fellow Greater Portlanders Dr. M. Carman Pettapiece, Tom Wentworth and me in the 1982 American Cancer Society's "Longest Day of Golf," a 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. marathon, a casual Cushman in his third round carded an eight-under-par 64. He closed with six straight threes. Wentworth had 73, Putney 74 and Dr. Pettapiece, in his 70s, 81. The foursome was 20 shots under combined handicaps.

Though Riverside has been under assault by several top shotmakers the past 55 years, there have been only two scores lower than Cushman's 64. Cushman followed with rounds of 66 and 68. Then came his first frown. As course play picked up, "Longest Day" foursome progress slowed. Cushman's game "deteriorated" to around par golf in the 174-hole cruise.

Cushman's scoring secret was tied to turning his back on fashionable television practices. These include: painstaking pacing of the fairways for yardage purposes and meticulous greens survey in a mysterious ritual known as "plumb bobbing." This practice is particularly puzzling to the old golf guard.

Tour pros coming to grips with strange courses have some justification for endless stalking of terrain. Members and course regulars don't. They've hit the same club for years. They're as comfortable with putting lines and greens swings.

As tournament director for the Maine Seniors' Golf Association in 1987, Putney had access to player ages. The Seniors' field of 208 at the demanding Portland Country Club course averaged 66.7 in age, approximately 40 years older per man than the

COMMENT

Ideas to ponder

- Rediscover the joy of the game.
- Plumb bobbing—Allow only the first to putt permitted this flagrant time-waster.
- Stalking the green—Same setup.
- Pacing—A no-no, either fairway to green and vice versa.
- Give tournament contestants course map, listing distances to the front of the green from recognizable fairway

Maine Open field of 216.

Both began play at 7:45 a.m. Seniors finished at 6 p.m. The final Open foursome groped home at 8:30 p.m. despite a generous sprinkling of time-aiding caddies.

How come such a disparity? The Seniors played a somewhat shorter course and had two less foursomes, but 2 1/2 hours?

Do the figures reflect either sadly out-of-shape young men or in-shape seniors unfettered by modern methods?

The answer is simple. The young tigers are saddled by what they perceive to be the way the game is played. They were raised in the TV era.

As a course-cluttering cure, which in the 1987 Maine Open featured an hour's delay between nines, I volunteered some ideas to minimize, if not stamp out, time-consuming practices:

- Plumb bobbing—Only the first to putt permitted this flagrant time-waster. Other group members must be ready to putt when it's their turn. Violations would be jotted down. A violator noted twice in one round to be assessed one stroke.

- Stalking the green—Same setup, same penalty.

- Pacing—Fairway to green and vice versa. Same penalty.

- Contestants are to receive a large-scale course map, listing distances to the front of the green from recognizable fairway spots. (The New England PGA forbids pacing.)

Contestants without exception point the accusing finger at other groups as time offenders. Would they accept a majority-rule vote to invoke such novel measures as a means of getting around?

Unlikely, though employing such procedures would enable tourney officials to maneuver 240 players daily.

Maine Open officials' answer to such revolutionary recommendations was predictable. The 1989 field was cut back to 180. It made for a tidy tournament. So what if the purse was \$6,000 less than it might have been through 60 more entry fees? Factually, most competitors return year after year because of the pleasant atmosphere, area activities and hospitality. Money seems secondary.

Unless there is a return to the "Miss 'Em Quick" practice of the late Ernest W. Newnham, veteran Portland, Maine, CC pro and holder of six Maine Open titles, five in succession, the game will be forever plagued by links lizards.

In his 60s, former National Seniors' champion Newnham took one last desperation step as personal protest to the Maine Open slowdown. He packed it in.

That was a shame. Another generation was deprived of marveling as a slight gentleman stepped to the tee and in almost the same motion split the fairway with a crisp drive. He would be off the tee and in full stride before his tee hit the ground.