

Friel offers insights learned during his 80 years in the golf industry

By PETER BLAIS

Phil Friel, 80, has been in the golf business since the 1920s and owns 10 public golf courses in New England.

That experience has given him some insights into the game that run counter to popular wisdom. Here are a few:

On speed of play: "All the focus on speeding up play is detrimental to the game," he said. "Everyone squawks about

it. It seems everybody's main goal is to get around the course as fast as they can.

That really strikes me as peculiar considering that most people have been dreaming all week long about getting onto the golf course in the first place. Golfers should take time to smell the flowers, to tell a joke and enjoy their company.

"We should be penalizing golfers for playing too fast and bumping into the people in front of them. Sort of a

speeding ticket.

You can't legislate speed of play because of the difference in golfers' abilities. But golfers are being taught to be impatient. I started writing to the National Golf Foundation [NGF] 25 years ago telling them not to bother about speed of play. They didn't listen to me then and they're not listening to me now.

"At Green Meadow [Hudson, N.H.] and Souhegan Woods [Amherst, N.H.] we start

players off the 1st and 10th tees early in the morning on weekends. If they play their first nine quicker than 2 1/2 hours, we make them wait until they were scheduled to make the turn before they can start playing the second nine. People were opposed to the idea at first, especially those used to playing their first nine holes in 1 1/2 hours. But everyone has gotten used to it over time

"It works well. Everyone is

spread around the course just perfectly. There are no hassles. And for the course operator, you actually end up selling more of the early tee times at the higher rate you usually get for those slots. By slowing play you make more money."

On golf's future: "Three or four years ago," he said, "I was worried about whether we could keep opening so many course [400 projected for 1995]. But it seems to be sustaining itself. We have seen many miniature golf courses and ranges open and die around here. It's simple to overbuild, especially because they are cheap ways to get into golf in the first place. But people getting into the practice range industry should be careful.

"It's the same with new course developers. Anyone building a \$5 million public course is in hot water from the start. The debt service is usually too high. Builders are often using numbers [financial projections] that are terribly wrong. It often takes two to three owners before a course gets solid financially. Whoever considers building a course today should be extremely careful.

"The NGF has been wrong forever in one area. They say it takes 25,000 people to support an 18-hole course. We've collected figures and it takes more."

On attracting new golfers: "The lack of affordable facilities for young people coming into golf bothers me," Friel said. "We need places where they can play for a reasonable amount of money. Unfortunately, kids can play after school and on weekends, which is when the regular courses are busiest. There's no time for kids to play.

"We've organized a group that's looking into those needs. We'd like to build a pilot, kids-only course that would charge about \$2 green fees. It would be funded with donations. It would be a full-length course requiring minimum maintenance and wouldn't compete with existing courses. We'd like other public courses to support it because it would build a market for the future."

On target golf: "It's insane," Friel said. "It's hard enough to hit the golf ball, period, never mind giving someone grass, then rocks, then grass again, then marsh.

"Some of this fascination with target golf is the result of golf courses being put on tough land where cost was no object. But a lot of it is largely the result of golf course architects simply trying to outdo each other."

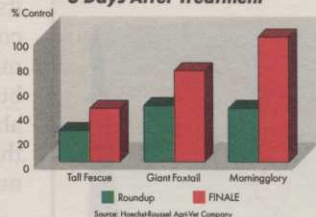
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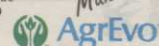
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