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DYING A SLOW DEATH

If you visit Google and search for “slow play” and “golf,” you’ll find 115,000 results. (Warning: If you search for “slow play” by itself, you’ll find a few sites unsuitable for children.)

Research shows the time it takes to play the beautiful game of golf is second only to expense on the list of reasons why people don’t participate. In short, speed – or the lack thereof – kills.

The causes are many. It’s easiest to blame televised Tour golf. The hacks at home watch and copy notoriously deliberate players such as Bernhard Langer and Ben Crane, who take eons to select clubs and line up putts. I’ve always thought slow professional groups should be haunted by the ghost of Rodney Dangerfield’s “Caddyshack” character screaming, “Hey! While we’re young!” when they lag. Yet, the Tour hasn’t fined a pro for slow play in centuries, so where’s the penalty for being a bad example?

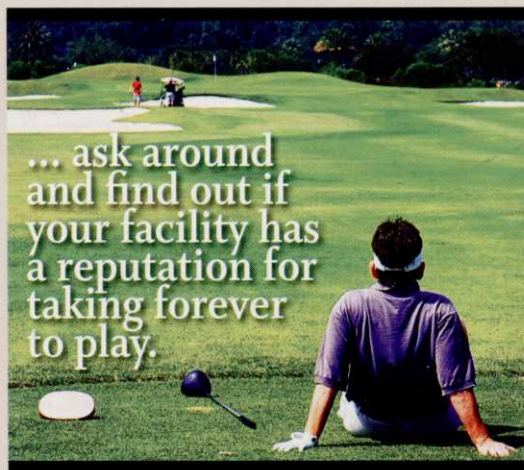
Some people blame more difficult designs that include nastier bunkers, environmental areas, fairways as narrow as a ‘60s necktie, higher rough and the like. I’ve played a ton of high-end daily fees, many designed by an architect whom I shall not name (hint: rhymes with “Fickless”), and too many are ball-eating monsters for the average schmuck.

By the way, I’ve come to start calling facilities like these bag-tag courses. You play there once, get your brains beat out during a six-hour round, grab your souvenir bag tag and never come back. If your facility is one of those, slow play is just a symptom of the real problem.

Some cite blazing green speeds as a contributing factor. Mounded putting surfaces designed in the 1920s for native turf cut at .25 can be a wee bit tricky when they’ve been redone with modern bents double-cut at .08 and rolled three times a week. If people are seven-putting and taking 20

minutes to clear a green, it’s probably time to rethink your mowing standards rather than booting them off the course.

Some blame the lack of etiquette and simple courtesy among modern golfers. Clowns who hit a dozen mulligans, take 10 minutes to look for a crappy ProStaff in the woods or have a preshot routine consisting of nine or more practice strokes are the worst offenders. The obvious solution to this (besides the liberal use of Tasers on the gluteus maximi of slowpokes) is a good, well-trained, motivated ranger staff. Every



one of you has one of those, right?

I was reminded of the effectiveness of most rangers when I received the following “Top Ten Rules for Rangers” from my superintendent friend Junior down in Naples, Fla.:

1. Never read yesterday’s newspaper while on the job.
2. Never pick up lost balls until they stop rolling.
3. That sign that says, “Do not enter – nature preserve,” doesn’t apply to you.
4. It’s always OK to start people on the back, especially if it’s one guy by himself.
5. Employee lunch means get as much food on your plate as possible – even if you don’t like it – to get your money’s worth.

6. When you play at the course, the signs and rules don’t apply to you. Go ahead and park right on the greens.

7. You’ll never make as much money here as you’re worth. You’re an irreplaceable cog in the cosmic wheel of golf.

8. God didn’t intend for you to pick up trash, now did he?

9. Just because they told you, “No golfers start before 7:10 on this side,” doesn’t mean you have to listen. Send them off as soon as they get there.

10. That shady tree over there was made just for rangering.

Slow play is a curse, but it’s also a mixed blessing brought about by the still surprising popularity of golf. The way I see it, incentivizing fast play might be better and easier than penalizing slowness, so think of creative ways you can use a carrot instead of a stick to move that donkey along.

Why not publicize underused, off-peak tee-time blocks and promote a four hour (or less) round for people who book during those times?

Why not print a set of tips for speedy play on the scorecard or a decal on golf cars?

Why not offer a free frosty beverage of the player’s choice if he finishes by the deadline?

Why not adjust green fees to create an incentive for good, fast players to pay a bit more for tee-times that are staggered at 10 minutes instead of six at certain times on peak days?

Why not make a commitment to speedy play and – mimicking a facility in Texas – market yourself as the home of the guaranteed four-hour round. At a time when many courses don’t have a special niche in their local market, that’s a pretty damn good one.

Do some research, ask around and find out if your facility has a reputation for taking forever to play. Think about how many customers have written you off already because they simply can’t afford to be away from work and family that long. Then fix it. If you don’t, your facility could die a slow death. **GCI**