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DEBATING FAIRWAY WIDTHS

Superintendents strive to reduce maintained areas, and it makes environmental and economical sense to reduce fairway acreage. However, the impact on golf must be considered before undertaking such measures, since the course exists for golfers' pleasure. At most courses, narrow fairways decrease revenues by slowing play and reducing enjoyment. Players go elsewhere, offsetting much of the cost savings.

Fairway widths range from 25 to 65 yards, with medium widths of 35 to 45 yards. Widths vary for a variety of reasons, including course theme, hole design, natural conditions and the effective throw of the irrigation system.

For example, dense trees often suggest narrow fairways, while prairie sites and public courses may feature wider fairways to fill space and account for windy conditions and poorer players. Many older and formally open courses have planted trees without considering their full growth potential, and end up narrowing fairways as the trees matured. Club members see tournament courses on TV with narrow fairways and often follow suit. However, fairways are often narrowed specifically for tournament play, so clubs that maintain these widths year round create conditions that may play too difficult for the average member.

Everyday golfers prefer hitting drivers on long holes, leaving layups to basketball, so most fairways should accommodate full drives. The USGA Slope Rating Charts say that scratch players need 32 yards and 20 handicappers need 40-yard widths to regularly hit fairways, making that range a good "standard" width. Fairways can narrow gradually from 200 to 300 yards off the tee to make them tougher for long hitters than for average players, generally accommodating all levels of player.

Every player, though, achieves success through different combinations of driving length, driving and approach accuracy

and putting and chipping skills. Standard fairway widths favor one type of player (wide fairways favor the "bomber" and narrow fairways favor accuracy), while varying fairway widths – from 25 to 55 yards at the prime landing zone with all widths in between – favor different players on different holes and provide more competitive golf and enjoyment.

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Width variation shouldn't be arbitrary. Longer par-4 holes should generally get wider fairways since golfers need to hit big drives to get home in regulation. While longer hitters probably want short par-5 holes to have wide fairways to let them really rip a tee shot to get home in two, shorter hitters see this as an unfair advantage. Architects normally, but not always, make par-5 fairways narrower than par-4 holes to add to risk to getting home in two.

Shorter holes can have precision or layup tee shots strongly suggested – but not demanded – by hazards and narrower landing areas.

Layups work best where they create a two- to three-club approach difference with a maximum length of 175 yards, because few lay to create substantially long approach shots.

If all long par 4s have wide fairways, while short ones get narrow fairways, they may get too similar. Some long holes

should have narrow fairways and vice versa, just for variety.

Individual fairway widths also should consider natural conditions and play factors like:

- Hole spacing – Where holes are close together, narrower fairways keep them better separated;
- Hazards – Tough and/or numerous hazards usually demand a little more room to operate, as do landing areas with hazards on both sides of the fairway instead of just one;
- Prevailing winds – Strong cross or head winds necessitate wider fairways;
- Fairway slopes – Landing areas with either steady cross and/or down slopes cause more roll and wider fairways to hold more shots, especially on reverse-slope doglegs (i.e. the outside of the dogleg being lower than the inside);
- Round position – Most golfers prefer the opening holes be wider, especially if you have no practice range or they haven't allowed time for warm-up. It also speeds play;
- Approach and putting difficulty – In most cases, shot difficulty should probably be averaged out on a hole. Holes with hard tee and approach shots plus difficult putting should be rare, because there is too little reward for a well played shot (and they are not much fun).

It can be a better option to reduce fairway acreage by starting fairways further from the tee, if you limit forward tee carries to 70 to 90 yards, middle tee carries to 100 to 120 yards and back tee carries to about 180 to 200 yards. With longer carries, golfers may not be able to reach the fairways in stiff headwinds. So, it's better to be somewhat conservative, especially for the forward tees.

A little design thought goes a long way in creating enjoyable golf, and fairways are too important to be designed, cut, or maintained without thinking through play considerations first – even if there is some mowing to be saved. **GCI**