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SHOT VALUES

“Shot Values” is a maddeningly vague term that I have been trying to define for years. The book “Golf Course Design” (by Geoff Cornish and Robert Muir Graves) says shot values are a “reflection of what the hole demands and the relative reward or punishment it metes out for good and bad shots... Each hole must be designed to balance risk and reward,” and as “related to difficulty and allowable margin for error.”

The practical question when trying to assess, design or redesign an actual golf hole is exactly how “shot values” link risk and reward, margin for error and punishment appropriately. Given the wide variety of golf holes and courses, it’s obvious there is some latitude, but here are my criteria for good shot values.

DOABILITY

Golfers should be able to finish every hole. It’s wrong to demand a shot that is doomed for failure (for example, a 320 yard forced carry), beyond reasonable expectations of accuracy (a postage-stamp green on a long par 4) and even golfer’s comfort levels, like aiming over OB (the famous Road Hole is the rare exception).

We know pros need width about 10 percent of the total shot length (for example, 20 yards wide for a 200 yard shot) and amateurs need 15 percent. Most greens should be sized accordingly. If golfers must carry a hazard, it should be a “doable” distance, whether 270 yards for long hitters or 90 yards from the forward tees.

RISK/REWARD

Few will risk strokes challenging hazards if nothing will be gained, but golfers are more likely to carry water if success gains one and possibly two strokes. On most holes, hazards can be fairly benign, allowing recovery about half the time. Otherwise, golfers will just play safely away from hazards, which is boring. This is the most delicate part of the equation and can vary from the first hole to later holes, when a match may be on the line.

PROMOTE SHOT SHAPING

A good test of golf “requires all the shots” which are created best when conditions including wind direction, ground slope and target angle, all strongly suggest a certain shot, like a fade.

OPTIONS

Holes may strongly suggest shots, like a draw, fade, high or low shot, high spin shot, etc., but there should be decent options and landing zones for those who can’t play that shot to hit at least some part of the fairway or green, even if not all or the best parts.

BAIL OUT ABILITY

Since any shot will be beyond the ability of someone, there should nearly always be an option to play safe somewhere close to the target.

PROPORTIONAL PUNISHMENT

Playing safe should avoid most hazards, and penalties should be greater to players who miss a challenge shot, especially when trying to gain strokes on Par 5 holes, and in general, for shots that miss a shot versus ones that miss by a little.

The practical question when trying to assess, design or redesign an actual golf hole is exactly how “shot values” link **risk and reward**, margin for error and punishment appropriately.

PROMOTE CREATIVITY

Hearing Tour pros recite their rounds as “Driver, 5 iron. Driver, 9 Iron,” sounds boring. The architecture should promote alternate shots to keep golf fun, including bump and run, “bounce it here to get it there” type shots.

BALANCE

There ought to be balanced shot demands on individual holes and throughout the course. Most holes should blend hard, easy and medium difficulty shots. If the tee shot is hard, the approach should generally be easier. And the holes should take turns giving advantage to long hitters, accurate drivers or good chippers throughout the match. “Balanced balance” (as opposed to nine hook holes on the front and nine slice holes on the back) is even better in most cases.

VARIETY

There should be differing challenges and/or margins of error. Some holes should be easier and some harder in different aspects – fairway width/tee shot accuracy, varying greens’ sizes and contours to challenge approach shots, putting difficulty and varying recovery types and difficulty, for example.

These are my definitions of shot values.

Others may vary – and courses can vary from these and still be exceptional exceptions – but I believe most good golf courses fall somewhere in these precepts. **GCI**