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WHY IS PAR USUALLY 72?

I am back with another one of those interesting discussions I had on the floor of the Golf Industry Show in San Diego. I was asked, "Why is par 72 standard?" My answer? "No one really knows."

But I know that most developers demand par-72 courses, and most golfers think something other than par 72, with four par 3s and par 5s, and distance balanced between nines, is somehow inferior.

As a golf course architect, I would expect most sites to yield better courses with other pars, or unbalanced nines. I tend to judge courses after I play them, but average (and perhaps cash strapped) golf-

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ers actively judge a course as worth their cash before their round, and 7,000 yards (even if the back tees are just a rumor to 97 percent of golfers) and par 72 are still all too important "factoids" to them.

Succumbing to pressure, most golf course architects design to par 72 to avoid inevitable criticism. Industry consultant John

Wait of Sirius Golf Advisors believes that in this day of Internet marketing, when potential customers get their first impression of your course from the yardage and photos on your website, par and yardage figures that meet golfers' expectations is even more of a marketing must, so there may be some powerful trends in place to keep par 72 the unofficial standard.

It wasn't always so standard. Pre-1900 courses were likely to sport pars from 69 to 73. I've never known exactly why "consensus" declared par 72 best, although it's not hard to speculate. As the business of golf matured, pros liked balanced nines to allow nine-hole rounds, tournaments and starts

off 1 and 10 tees to give golfers similar experiences.

The par 4 is probably the best expression of golf strategy and should be the predominant hole type. The tee shot determines the chance of success on the approach shot, depending on whether it is in rough, hazard or fairway, and even if it's on the "better" side of the fairway. The approach shot determines if your score will be birdie, par, or bogey. If early golf courses were built on featureless ground, or with better earthmoving technology, golf courses might have featured all par-4 holes. But, whether to fit the land, or create variety, par-3 and par-5 holes were built and became accepted as part of the mix.

But, as golf evolves, there may be strong reasons to change the traditional mix and reduce par. First, most par-5 holes have second shots that are inherently less interesting, without the option to reach the green in two shots. How many times should we offer a great chance to beat par? Once per nine seems enough.

The USGA and many older courses have actually been solidifying this concept for years, with many fine older courses currently playing to par 70 or 71 as a result of converting their shorter par-5 holes to par-4s. With golf shots getting longer, we can easily restore or protect the value of par with a little "scorecard magic" by dropping two strokes with the magic of the pen. The par-5 holes that remain should be shorter, rather than longer so that most are reachable in two.

Other new conditions suggest reducing par, too. As construction costs rise, and regulatory limits on turf acreage and water usage increase, the pressure to build on less land rises, too. The simplest way to reduce acres and budgets is to eliminate a few par-5 holes, and maybe add in another par-3 hole as well for par of 70 or 69.

I have a hunch that when new course construction picks up again, many golf course architects will be proposing par-70 courses for just these reasons. Someone should start the drumbeat for reduced par as golf moves forward. Whoops, someone just did. **GCI**