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MY THOUGHTS ON TEE IT FORWARD

Earlier this summer, a USGA and PGA of America unveiled a program called "Tee It Forward." In case you missed it, here is what I consider the most relevant part of the press release:

"To help golfers have more fun on the course and enhance their overall experience by playing from a set of tees best suited to their abilities, The PGA of America and the United States Golf Association have partnered to support 'Tee It Forward,' a new national initiative. Tee It Forward encourages all golfers to play the course at a length that is aligned with their average driving distance (see accompanying chart for guidelines). Golfers can speed up play by utilizing tees that provide the greatest playability and enjoyment."

Tee It Forward was greeted as if it were the second coming of Bobby Jones. Players, officials and the golf media latched onto it like a life preserver promising to float the golf industry to economic success. Barney Adams, the founder of Adams Golf and the individual widely credited with pushing the Tee It Forward concept, became the darling of the golf world for his revolutionary idea.

To which all I can say is, "Huh?" Isn't teeing it forward for fun and lower scores obvious?

Playing from the proper tee – proper for you, that is – should be one of golf's bedrock principles. However, golfers do what they want to do. If they want to take a cart, they will. If they want to fix a ballmark or rake a bunker, they will. If they want to walk on your line, they will.

So if they want to play from a tee better suited to their games, they will. But they don't, or at least very few of them do. They pay the big bucks to play Pebble Beach or Bethpage Black and they want "the whole experience," so they move a tee or two back from where they should be hitting and spend the entire day looking for balls in the rough and hitting fairway woods into greens on par fours. They do the same thing at their home courses, too.

Can they honestly call that fun? I call it foolish. And while these same guys – and, rarely, gals – might try teeing it forward once or twice, my gut tells me they'll soon be creeping back, convincing themselves only the championship tees show them the "real" golf course and provide a better

test of their games.

When I was a kid learning to play golf, my father wouldn't let me play from anywhere but the forward tees. He wanted me to learn the fundamentals of the game, specifically why you do certain things as a player or a caddie. He made me want to go to the golf course by holding me back until I was ready. He wanted me to learn about tradition, sportsmanship and the other principles at the game's core.

My early experiences also taught me the fun and usefulness of playing from different tees. To this day, I like to choose my tees, moving around day to day. It allows me to practice my game, use different clubs, and see new areas of the course. I'll even occasionally tee it up with my wife from the forward tees to experience a drivable par four. Now that's fun.

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Years ago, I remember reading in a golf magazine an instruction tip that suggested starting the new golf season by playing a few rounds from the forward tees as a way of getting used to the idea of shooting lower scores. That always struck me as a pretty smart idea.

Something that doesn't strike me as smart – or all that relevant – is the concept put forward by golf's governing bodies that by teeing it forward amateurs have the chance to play a course at the same relative distance as the tour pros. I think they are saying if you're hitting your 7 iron into the green from 150 yards and the pro is hitting his 7 iron in from 180 yards, you're getting the same experience. I don't buy it. But more importantly, it doesn't matter. This isn't about the pros at all.

What I absolutely do agree with is that if more golfers were hitting approach shots with 6 and 7 irons, rather than fairway woods, hybrids and long irons, their chances for enjoyment increase. Also, playing from forward tees should result in

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lower scores, shorter distances traveled on each hole and even fewer lost balls.

Let me share another perspective. A few months ago, I took a lesson from PGA Teaching Professional Marty Nowicki at Turning Stone Resort in upstate New York. He had his own ideas about getting golfers to play from the right tees, especially when they are starting out.

“Move up to the 100-yard mark and treat every hole like a par 5,” Marty suggested. “Scoring 5 for a new golfer with some good basic advice is a good score. If you can’t get down in 5, start from 50 yards or even 30 yards with the same objective. That is how people should learn this great game.

“If we applied this concept to other sports,” Marty went on, “you would never start a new skier on a double Black Diamond trail, for example. You

would start her learning how to put on the equipment, how to walk in those heavy boots, how to put on the skis. Once she accomplished that, you would teach her how to walk in skis, and so on.”

Which reminds me of the concept, taught by some golf pros and usually to kids, of beginning on the putting green with three-inch putts. Then moving further from the hole, then off the green, then back into the fairway, and so on.

I’ve seen studies that prove golfers who start this way – from the hole back – shoot lower scores faster than golfers who began on the driving range.

So we should all embrace whatever ideas get golfers playing better, faster, more intelligently and having more fun. Wherever you work, whatever you do, we should all have those goals in mind. **GCI**

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