

The ratings game

by Jeff Brauer

If you delve back into the long history of this illustrious sport I'd bet that you'd find it was the construction of the game's second golf course that served as the catalyst for the first official golf course ranking.

So why do we find this process so fascinating? Because it's simple human nature to rank the things we like and enjoy – and golf is certainly no different.

Rankings, though, create a fair amount of anxiety among clubs, superintendents and golf course architects, like myself. So to get a better handle on getting a leg up on the ranking process, I tracked down Ron Whitten, Golf Digest's resident rankings guru, and asked him to enlighten us on the golf course ranking process.

What are the best and worst parts about doing these rankings?

After 27 years, I'd say the best part is helping generate interest and enthusiasm for golf course design. I love the fact that people debate our "100 Greatest" rankings, complain about them, even condemn them. We don't claim to have a perfect system, but we do offer justification for our rankings, for all to see. You may not agree with our list, but at least you know how we got there.

The worst part is informing courses that fell off our rankings. No one likes to receive bad news, and I don't enjoy delivering it. They're not losers, but they feel like they are. The worst situations are when courses fall off simply because it didn't get enough evaluations to qualify for a ranking. (We need a minimum of 10 over 8 years for Best in State, 25 over 8 years for 100 Greatest Public, 45 over 8 years for 100 Greatest.)

It's really our task, not theirs, to maintain coverage. With 1,100 panelists, you'd think that would be easy, but it's not. We have 1,600 courses competing in our various surveys every two years. Panelists are volunteers, travel and play at the own expense and timetables. It's hard to get everybody everywhere.

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Another downside for me is that I have been denied a few opportunities to participate in design because Golf Digest's is policy that my involvement makes those designs ineligible for a Golf Digest ranking. At least two such courses have gone on to be ranked by Golf Digest, which shows the clients made wise decisions.

What don't most people know about the ranking process?

I'd like to think readers know a lot about our ranking process because we reveal as much as any publication about the process - 1,100 panelists judging on a 1-10 scale on seven criteria, highest score wins, etc. What clubs and architects sometimes forget is it's a magazine article. It's meant to attract readers and generate talk, even debate. I've always called it our "swimsuit issue."

How should clubs treat raters

from golf magazines?

I can only speak for Golf Digest. We ask clubs to treat Golf Digest panelists as they would any other paying guests. No special treatment. No high pressure sales tactics. Just let panelists do their job.

No club has ever been so crass as to offer payment in exchange for a ranking. We had a few instances where clubs offered inducements, like travel and accommodations, to a panelist. That's against our rules, and the club was removed from survey consideration for a while, and the panelist who accepted the offer was dismissed.

What single factor might affect a Golf Digest ratings the most?

Shot Values, since its score is doubled in our formula. However, Shot Values are either

strong or weak. Without a major redesign, it's hard to enhance shot values.

"Conditioning" is the one area every club can control. Our new definition focuses on firm and fast fairways and firm-yet-receptive greens over color. You can roll back the irrigation, install more drainage, and improve your conditioning score.

Do rankings increase memberships, dues or fees?

I've never paid much attention to memberships or fees. In the 1990's, every public course that won our "Best New Public" jacked up its green fee. That's part of the reason we instituted a "Best New Affordable" category, with a ceiling of \$50 greens fees (later \$75). That didn't keep winners from raising prices. Hey, that's business.

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Why do some courses shun ratings?

The more exclusive a club, the less its membership wants to share its course with outsiders, particularly when several magazines want access. I can understand why some clubs don't want to be considered. We abide by their guest restrictions and still get evaluations for those clubs, but it takes much longer.

What list is the most important to be on?

That depends upon a course's goal. If it's a local daily-fee hoping to attract more business, a 5-star rating in "Places to Play" is ideal. A national membership club trying to convince a multi-millionaire to join his 15th club may seek listing on America's 100 Greatest. Obviously, we consider America's 100 Greatest to be the

ultimate achievement, but there's nothing wrong with being ranked one of the "Best in State" or a "Best New Course."

Why is the Golf Digest list the best?

I'm biased, but I like to think Golf Digest's list is the most respected because we offer the most transparency. We publish category-by-category scores of all winning courses, and we base our results solely on those scores. We don't cook the books.

Golf Digest's rankings have existed since 1966 so it's the oldest, by far, among golf publications, which makes it the most recognizable to most golfers.

With almost 16,000 US courses, is a Top 100 enough? Have you considered either 200, or in current

parlance, identifying the top 1 percent?"

Our franchise is 100 Greatest, and has been since 1969 (reduced from 200 Toughest). We feel comfortable with keeping it at Top 100. It's tough, because about 250 courses can legitimately contend for our 100 Greatest, but I think readers appreciate the consistency of maintaining a 100 Greatest ranking. Another publication ranks 200, but I like to say they just don't want to make the tough decisions.

Has anyone ever gone to extremes to influence the Golf Digest rankings?

In the 1990's Oakland Hills dropped from the Top 10. When asked why, I reported that their "Aesthetics" score had dropped. A few months later, Alice Dye told me that Oakland Hills had

installed a waterfall behind their 16th green "to improve their numbers with Golf Digest." I called the superintendent, who said they installed the waterfall primarily to drain the clubhouse air conditioning, but thought it might make a neat feature. It was 800 yards from the clubhouse, and a totally artificial rock garden. It didn't improve their "aesthetics" numbers and they later removed it.

A superintendent was reportedly fired when his course dropped in our ranking due primarily to a drop in the conditioning score – but that is rare. **GCI**

Jeff Brauer is a licensed golf course architect and president of GolfScapes, based in Arlington, Texas. He is the author of GCI's "Design Concepts" column.

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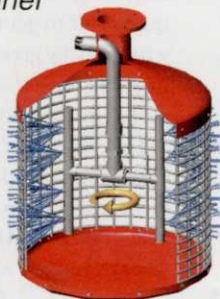
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Case Study

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