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ONCE MORE ON FORWARD TEES

Because it's just that important.

At a recent golf conference, I again presented the case for generally shorter forward tees. It seemed more industry people attended and at least nodded in agreement. That, of course, is no guarantee they will rush home and rework their courses.

One of the most interesting things I heard was a GM relating that "His job is to let our players have fun and prolong their playing careers." Perhaps Baby Boomers are finally abandoning our quest for "eternal youth" and admitting we are getting older. As golf's biggest demographic, it may spur us to finally design courses for the way golf is really played (The second most interesting thing was a consensus that continuous putting is the biggest key to increasing speed of play).

In the last 30 years of design, there was too much concern over "how Tour Pros would play this" even though chances of hosting any kind of tournament were about equal to the chance of an alien landing. At the same time, there was far too little concern for whether seniors or females could carry a creek, had an awkward angle or were even having fun on the golf course. In other words, we spent three decades designing for all the wrong creatures.

I was made aware of designing for all players early. My mentors designed mostly public courses, and actually sent me out to spend a day measuring where average golfers, seniors, and women actually hit their tee shots. (About 225, 190 and 140 yards respectively back then, and no different today, despite the distance gains at the top).

As ASGCA president in 1995, Alice Dye, an early forward-tee proponent, sought me out to discuss an article I had penned for *Golf for Women* magazine. I had written that I design

most par 4s so a woman's third shot was equivalent to an average man's typical approach shot, i.e., both being about 7 irons.

She asked one simple question – Why? I asked one, too. Why couldn't I answer?

It just seemed too difficult to design for 140 to 300 yard tee shots. Maybe so, but why favor the 1 percent who hit it 300 yards? Why ignore the 20 percent of senior golfers and 4-20 percent female players? Pure math compels us to design for those who actually play the course the most.

Setting tees 25-30 yards shorter than the previous tee gets all tee shots to the same landing area, with an economically efficient single set of fairway bunkering, etc. However, leaving both back and forward tee players with the same distance to the green creates vastly different golf experiences and certainly isn't equal.

Old paradigm – determine forward tees with 25-30 yard tee splits.

New paradigm – determine forward tees by a percentage of hole length. Front tees should be about 48 percent of back tees, based on 140 to 290 yard tee shots.

My co-presenter was Arthur Little, who with his wife Jan Leeming, had added shorter tees at their own golf course, and later helped other courses do the same. They provide numerous examples of commercial success from shortening your front two tees, finding that it helps attract more:

- Female customers, who often become more supportive of their husbands golf
- Senior men, who play more and extend their playing careers with shorter tees
- Junior play (who come with mom at first)
- Outings, particularly charities and benefits

- Women feel they are a contributing and valuable team member

- Men actively recruit women to play on their teams (A "D" player who can reach greens is really valuable!)

Bringing in all these less-traditional golfers increased revenue through a larger and more durable customer base. Some revenue increase was a result of faster play because with properly positioned forward tees, not only are many shots eliminated, but back tee players don't have to wait as long for players ahead to be out of range. Lastly, the perception of women as slow players started to disappear!

I asked Arthur and Jan how much marketing this took. As it turns out, women share their feelings more than men (who knew?) and word-of-mouth was about all it took to bring a new customer base to these golf courses.

Adding forward tees is usually easy and not terribly expensive to do. On most holes, I can add one back tee (for those "must have 7,000 yard holdouts" and two forward tees, as per the example below. The middle two tees often remain untouched, while we convert the former red tees (often over 5,000 yards, rather than at a more desirable sub-4,400 yards) to white, which is just about right. (These are shown just right of the power orange line depicting power lines). Then, we add the new red tee well up the fairway at the proper yardage.

We have found that it's easier to convince golfers if we look at individual holes (especially those with forced carries, or long par 4s that are just out of reach) rather than tell them up front we are wholesale shortening the course. There is still some male ego and female aversion to "condescending attitude." However, they usually adjust when shown the benefits on a hole-by-hole basis. **GCI**