

Northern California based architect Tom Johnson e-mailed a few months ago to ask why golf does not have its own "think tank." Good question. Think tanks are government- or business-sponsored groups that research, brainstorm and look ahead.

Golf has no shortage of cocktail congregations that consistently end up as an excuse for a vacation followed by a press release announcing a new feel-good, corporate-esque initiative. When these execs do meet and talk specifics, they share tips on protecting their antitrust exemptions and nonprofit tax shelters.

Somehow golf's worst overspenders and pilagers are always invited to these affairs, as are a few bottom-line executive types who complain that Wall Street is hounding them because no one is growing the game, making it hard for them to report better third-quarter earnings than last year.

Why is there no think tank of creative folks who sit behind closed doors brainstorming ways to improve the sport?

Golf is a conservative sport by nature and typically afraid of new ideas. Think tanks have been known to come up with plenty of strange, if not downright goofy, schemes.

You might have heard about DARPA. That's the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. Over the years, DARPA's work helped create the Internet, Global Positioning Satellite systems, the computer mouse and stealth technology.

Those were DARPA's birdies.

This year DARPA came up with a crackpot scheme to improve our foreign intelligence with an online futures market where folks tucked away as far as the mountains of Pakistan could place online bets, wagering where the next terrorist might strike.

That's a DARPA triple bogey.

It wouldn't take long for an effective golf think tank to point out how unimaginative and tedious the PGA Tour has become, and how a more creative Tour schedule could re-invigorate recreational golf.

The think tank might question why it costs so much to build a USGA green and it could point out that the USGA's handicap system tends to create all sorts of golfing side effects like

Golf Could Use a Good Think Tank

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



A SUPERINTENDENT
WHO HAS DONE
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the stroke play mentality, stigmas attached to nine-hole rounds and the silly emphasis on course ratings over fun.

And a think tank could point out that golf was a steadily thriving community sport, with an ancient model in Scotland and a modern example in Sweden.

The golf industry needs some imaginative thinking to inject life into the recreational game. Golf must improve its image environmentally, better explain the silliness of the distance issue to golfers and find ways to share innovative ideas that provide developers incentive to create fun and affordable golf facilities.

Some suggested guidelines for a think tank:

- No organizational blazer types would be allowed into meetings.
- No holders of golf industry stocks will be eligible.
- People who suggest the golf industry simply needs a fresh marketing campaign can save their breath.

The think tank will not listen to architects who build \$25 million golf courses and brag about how much they spent. Those helping them run up such tabs need not apply either.

A superintendent who has done wonders on a \$400,000 budget will be consulted, but not a superintendent who grumbles about how \$1 million just doesn't go as far as it used to.

Golf professionals who've schmoozed their way to the top can stay home. We only want those who've developed innovative programs that have made golf more fun to learn and play.

And finally, a golf think tank should assemble those who are not afraid to generate ideas that build on golf's greatest traditions while thinking of ways to grow the sport based on the principles of affordability and fun.

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