

**W**hen he was a kid growing up in the 1960s, Mike Hughes remembers his dad going off with his buddies to play golf nearly every

Saturday and Sunday. Hughes' mom never barked at her husband for taking so much time to work on his golf game. Neither did Hughes or his siblings.

"It was beyond our imagining for any of us to criticize him," Hughes says. "That's what those guys did in those days, and it was good for the golf business."

But that was then. And Hughes, the well-liked executive director of the National Golf Course Owners Association, chuckles when he thinks of what is now. He admits his spouse would never let him get away with playing *that* much golf. "That wouldn't work in my family ... to put it mildly," Hughes said.

These days, most parents don't let their personal activities steer their lives, Hughes said. They let their children's activities steer them. And that means driving their kids here and there and everywhere on Saturdays and Sundays — not spending five hours smacking the dimpled ball on the golf course and another hour rehashing the round in the clubhouse over a cold beverage.

Hughes' point is the golf industry needs to recognize this fact and do something about it — now. Time is a gargantuan issue in the industry because contemporary dads, unlike Hughes' father, no longer have nothing but time to play golf. In fact, many have to beg, borrow and steal for time to get in nine holes.

During his address to owners at the National Golf Course Owners Association's annual conference last month, Hughes belabored the point that they must cater to the time-starved golfers' needs. Hughes let owners have a glimpse into his own life to help make his point.

"My life has no half-day increments," Hughes said, noting that most activities he partakes in are less than two hours. "That's the way I live my life, and that's the way many in my generation live their lives. If it's a business meeting, it's in that time frame. If it's a church meeting, it's in that time frame. If it's a family activity, it's in that time frame."

We've heard over and over that a big reason

## Those Were the Days, My Friend

BY LARRY AYLWARD



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more people don't play golf is because they don't have five hours to spare. Courses seem bent on speeding up rounds, which is fine. But Hughes' point about time increments can't be ignored.

A reason — and probably the main reason — that golf leagues are so popular is that players can play nine holes in two hours or less, Hughes said. "It's quick, and it fits in the time increment that many people are living in."

Yes, there's still the group of players who play 18 holes once or twice a week, and owners must keep catering to their needs. "But there's a sizeable portion of the population where we need to think about different kinds of programming," Hughes said. "Let's package the product in a way that's easy for people to buy it in terms of pricing and available time."

Maybe that means offering programs where players can play three holes for \$5 or five holes for \$10 during the week. It would take some strategic planning, but it could work.

Then golf courses could satisfy the people who don't have a lot of extra time on their hands, like myself. I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to go to the course up the street from my house and play golf — for an hour. That might mean playing only five holes, but it would suffice. And as a father of two young children, it would fit in my time schedule pleasantly.

As Hughes said, there are two groups of golf consumers — the diehard players and the fringe players. The challenge for owners is to take care of them both without interfering with either of them. Owners must continue to take care of the regulars, but they can't ignore the people who would like to play on their own terms.

"We have to reach out," Hughes said. "We have to recognize that the golf consumer has changed."

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