

Compounding the silliness of narrowing and lengthening courses is the impact of unregulated technology on modern golf's problems of slower play.

More than a few owners can probably relate to Cog Hill Country Club owner and operator Frank Jemsek's slow-play-related revenue declines. In the busy summer months, his courses are getting less play — not because golfers have lost interest in the Lemont, Ill., facility, but because so many players tire of waiting for greens to clear.

Armed with hot balls and drivers, many golfers are now able to drive the green on a short par 4 or get home in two on a par 5. These shot types prevent golfers from playing holes in a timely fashion because they have to wait until the players in front of them have finished on the green. This slowdown backs up all of the golfers behind them.

The waiting also means tee times need more space between them, and with Cog Hill rounds taking longer and only so much sunlight in the day, some customers are being turned away while others are forced to play fewer than 18 holes. Not only does waiting lead to fewer rounds on busy days, golfers leave the course dissatisfied with their rounds. But the waiting problem isn't relegated to Cog Hill — it has affected the professional ranks, too.

In 2003, the PGA Tour instituted a new set of guidelines and fines for players "put on the clock" too many times. The Tour practically jumped for joy when the average 2003 round decreased by 10 minutes to — get this — just four hours and 37 minutes, and that's with no lost balls.

At the recent Honda Classic, a new course debuted and featured thought-provoking green complexes created by antistrategist Tom Fazio. Jay Delsing opened the third round as a single and took a mind-boggling three hours and 23 minutes to complete a round by himself. The rest of the field played in twosomes and took more than 4.5 hours to finish 18 holes. Yes, the players are slow, but unregulated technology has thrown designs out of whack, adding more of those painful five- and 10-minute waits.

Slow Play Kills Revenues Quickly

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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At the Nissan Open this year, every group waited for the par-4 10th green to clear (that rarely used to happen). Just a few years ago, the course's back nine par 5s were only reachable in two by a few players. Now just about every group waits for those greens to clear.

The overall effect of the tepid play is brutal. Crowds are bored, players look numb and perhaps it's not a surprise that attendance is flat everywhere you look outside Phoenix and the Majors.

In contrast, John Daly, Luke Donald and Chris Riley provided a glimpse into the world of fast play during the 2004 Buick Invitational's sudden-death playoff. Each pulled their clubs and played — no pacing, no twitching, no backing off, no painful preshot routine and, most of all, no waiting.

Faced with declining 2004 television ratings, PGA Tour commissioner Tim Finchem was asked by *Golfweek* to name his favorite moment of the "West Coast Swing."

Finchem instead pointed out what was not his No. 1 moment: "I picked on Chris Riley about this. If he makes the putt at 18 in San Diego (in his playoff against John Daly at the Buick Invitational), we go into the *60 Minutes* time frame [and] our ratings go up probably a full point. Chris crushed me."

Sliding into the *60 Minutes* time slot may allow the PGA Tour to convince networks that their "product" is healthy. But a full point ratings bump won't help the rest of golf. Fewer waits and faster rounds will.

But as long as technology goes unregulated, the slow play problem will only get worse.

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