

# Playing the Right Amount of Golf

The course of tomorrow should be designed to help time-conscious golfers

By Bill Deegan

**L**ower the time commitment. Or raise the value. That's the conclusion of a study presented at the Golf 20/20 conference last fall at the World Golf Village. The analysis, performed by DYG Inc. and titled "The Time Crunch Convergence," indicates today's society prefers to stay busy, likes variety and wants to derive maximum enjoyment from the time it invests in any activity — including golf.

An interesting report it would seem, especially at a time when the PGA is promoting the game through its "Play Golf America" program and the World Golf Foundation is extending this outreach to small children with its National School Golf Program. Based on the findings of this study, it appears that the real job at hand might be in trying to keep these new players engaged once they've been introduced to the game.

Can the game of golf meet this challenge? Most course management personnel would say that the promotion of faster play has never been greater. Course marshals are out in ever-increasing numbers to cajole, coax or coerce a faster pace from slower players who, in many cases, have paid a substantial amount of money to make their ways around golf courses. These same marshals correctly point out that skill level and the ability to keep things moving are critical variables in the process, and that there are too many people out there on the course today, especially those new golfers, who fall short in both categories.

The real challenge becomes the task of driving these players just hard enough to play at about a four-hour pace, but not so hard that you drive them completely away from the game.

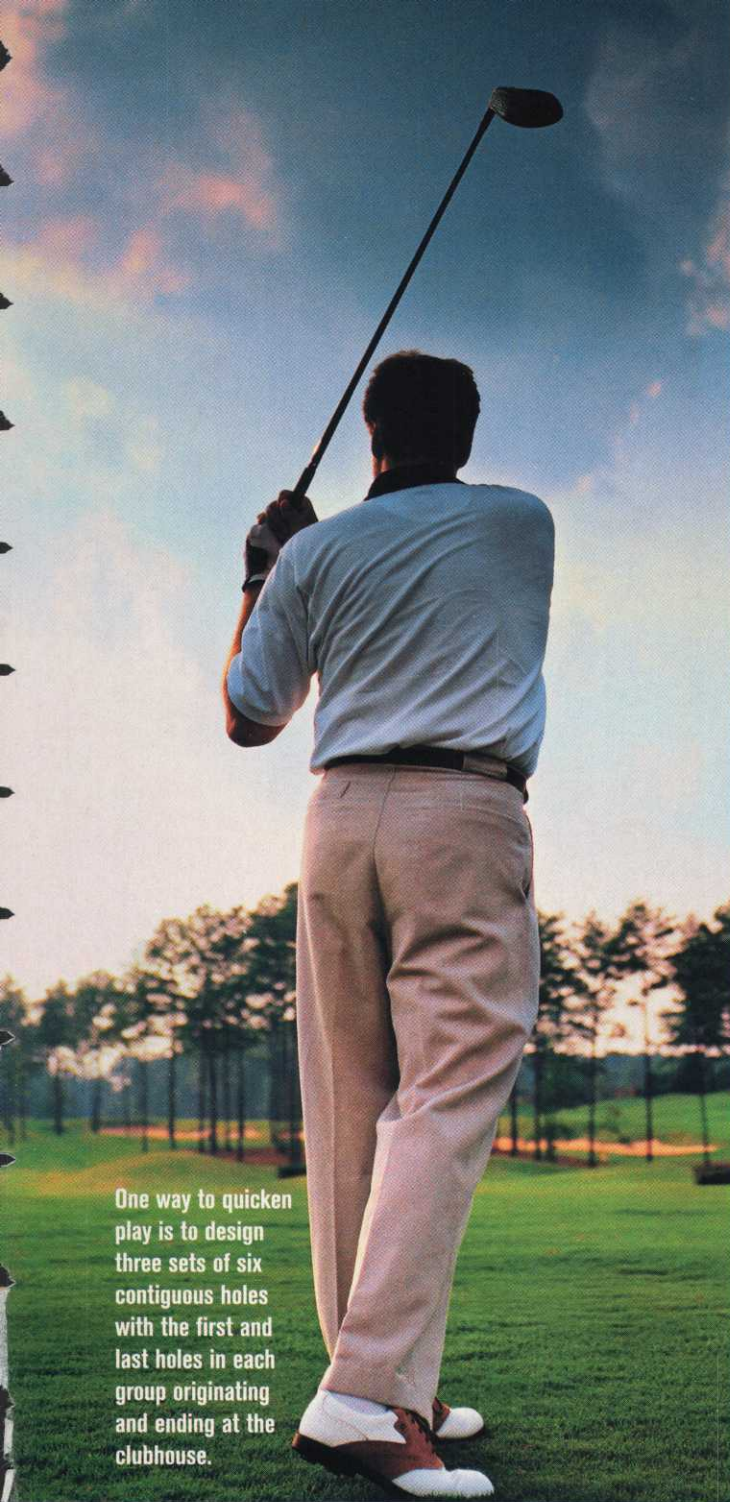
But there other ways, too, and it's time to take a hard look at them. How about if we just make it easier to play a little less golf — give players the opportunity to comfortably play an abbreviated round. You're right; they can do that now by just playing nine, but let's just suppose that nine holes isn't the right amount of golf. Suppose that these time-challenged players would be even happier if they were able to play about three quarters of a round, something that could be accomplished in three hours or less, even at a slow pace.

What if there are enough people out there who think that 12 or 13 holes is the right amount of golf? That can also be done now, but we all know that it's not that easy, especially on a crowded course from a hole that is a good distance from the clubhouse. No matter how careful players are, the play of others will be interrupted as they weave their ways back to the clubhouse.

Now, before all of the purists get in an uproar, let's get one thing straight: Golf is a game of 18 holes. That will not and should not change. Time and tradition has made the number sacrosanct. And we still have that tradition, not to mention a professional structure and a handicap system that involves millions of people. The truth is, regardless of how they came up with the number 18, that's a full round, and it's not about to change.

That said, we still are left facing a golfing





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population that is growing and evolving. We now know that many of today's golfers expect to play a round within a constrained schedule and thoroughly enjoy the experience while they are out there. How do you do all of that when the pace is slow? There is no single answer, especially for most existing courses, but it's time to inject course design into the process — start building courses with a flow of holes that brings players back to the clubhouse somewhere in the vicinity of the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> holes.

A symmetrical approach would result in what could be called the “three-six” golf course — three sets of six contiguous holes with the first and last holes in each group originating and terminating at the clubhouse. This offers either a

12- or 18-hole round or, for that matter, a six-hole option for those after-work players seeking a “little bit of golf” — the quick six. If a nine-hole option is essential, then a 9-3-6 or 9-4-5 layout will achieve much the same end. Obviously, the critical factor is the hole that returns to the clubhouse that offers the “more than nine but less than 18” termination point. With such a layout, if things are moving slowly golfers can easily exit the course at the ninth hole or decide to play the next three or four more holes that will also end the round at the clubhouse.

Who are these short-course players? Let's start with couples, especially time-challenged couples, and those who enjoy playing together but must also manage busy schedules. Trying to squeeze in a more than four-hour round of golf in between the gymnastics practice and the soccer game might be a tough proposition. Such a course would offer both partners the opportunity to play an abbreviated round (12 holes) or yet another option for one to play the full 18 while the other is able to conveniently terminate at the clubhouse after 12 holes to have lunch, spend more time getting refreshed in the locker room/health club or simply attend to other matters.

That's just one example — this approach would also offer the same flexibility to a variety of course customers. Some more mature players would be another group that might take advantage of an abbreviated round or even that “little bit of golf” option (six holes) available on a three-six track. As many of us know, hard as we try, the body isn't always as tough as it used to be and some rounds can simply turn into a test of staying power.

On some days, 12 or 13 holes feels just right. This would also apply to a mixed-aged grouping — younger adults playing with their parents who are not suffering from pain but simply get tired. Again, in the case of the three-six layout, beginners in the family could join in for six holes with the rest of the family to develop a taste for the game during those frustrating, first few rounds of golf.

When you think about it, such a course design has especially positive implications for a resort golf operation. For the most part, every category of golfer described in the previous paragraphs can be found frequenting a resort venue — men, women, older golfers, young adults, teenagers, kids, couples (young and old), beginners, good and bad golfers — all of whom can be found playing together. The course of tomorrow should be designed to help these time-conscious vacationers on their daily mission to achieve the optimum mix of recreation and not decide to skip golf “because it takes too long.”

Given the opportunity to play and pay for the “right amount of golf,” we can expect to see more people coming out to play less golf more often. Why? It's simple, really — where many of today's potential golfers are concerned, lowering the time commitment in itself will raise the value of the experience. ■

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