

The folks at Augusta National have asked for your help. Yep, the days of Hootie are definitely long gone.

At last month's Masters, Chairman Billy Payne talked about the club's new "global initiative" to "grow the game internationally and get more youngsters excited about golf and the lifelong lessons it teaches."

So to kick off this ambitious idea, the club televised its popular par-3 contest on Wednesday to show that a pee-wee course can be extraordinarily cool.

During tournament play, the club let the kids of patrons in free. They even added social networking features on www.masters.org. Payne reasoned, and rightfully so, that Bobby Jones and Clifford Roberts believed a great Masters experience would get people excited about the game of golf.

Unfortunately, they then had to play the par-3 contest and the Masters, which probably didn't get people too excited about the game.

The folks at ESPN drew a huge rating for the par-3 contest, but a scene involving kids running around and damaging greens probably failed to inspire many parents or kids to play golf. Superintendents and club committee types probably came away less likely to suggest closing the course once a week to host a family-only Easter egg hunt in the name of growing the game.

Those of us who had not been to the Masters the past few years had no idea that this great little Wednesday affair had transmogrified into PGA Tour Day Care's version of a cotillion coming-out party. Instead of white gloves, we got way too many pre-kindergarten kids in white jump suits turning Clifford Roberts' dream course into Romper Room.

And they wonder why ol' Cliff kiboshed the membership application of a guy with six kids.

Anyway, things got worse for the future of golf when the big tournament started. The last threesome took five hours and 10 minutes to finish the first round in the dark. Things digressed to 5:37 Friday. And that was with-

A Bad Execution of Good Intentions

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



AUGUSTA NATIONAL
IS HURTING ITS OWN
CAUSE BY MAKING
THE MASTERS
A TORTURE TEST

out lost balls and less than 100 players on the course.

By Sunday, the redesigned Augusta National had so badly messed with the heads and games of the world's best, that it took the last twosome five hours to finish after the wind kicked up. And that's playing in a field of 45 on a beautifully conditioned course.

This is not the way to grow the game.

Sadly, as well intentioned as the club is in its outreach efforts, it's only doing more damage unless it restores the excitement of the Masters to its place as a celebration of the game. No one in their right mind is going to take up golf watching a torture test.

Because watching the world's best struggle only makes people wonder: If they can't do it, how can I?

As determined as Payne seems to be, he's going to have to decide if protecting par is worth sabotaging his efforts and the greatest sporting event in the world. So far, the club seems hellbent on making the flat bellies struggle so it can get the last laugh. But is it really that fun to have most of the country talking about how you messed up a great thing?

If you watched the Masters and agree, tell Payne yourself. The club's Web site offers a page to sign up and share your comments at www.masters.org/ggw/en/index.

You can also take this opportunity to share success stories or make pleas for setting new environmentally and common-sense driven maintenance practices.

The Augusta leaders say they want to hear it and share the best ideas with the golf world. I believe them. I'm just not sure they know how to lead by example.

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