

Time for Cha

The golf industry must modify

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Following the 9/11 attacks, *Golfdom's* editorial team asked me to contemplate golf's place in a vastly different world. I railed on about the need for more native golf, questioned how high-end golf properties could lead to a successful future, and I touched upon the disastrous influence of club technology on the game.

Six years later, we face a collapsing economy and dismal news about the health of our sport. Rounds are down this year — several percent in some regions. We're looking at year three of a net golf course loss, with the trend perhaps halting next year only because there is no financing to pave over courses to build shopping centers.

Rising fuel costs and the demise of the financial markets will directly impact the sport for years to come, while television rat-

ings for professional golf plummeted after Tiger Woods' knee injury.

Yet, golf is slowly becoming aware that it still has the potential to thrive. Even amidst all of this gloom and doom, reminders come both in the thrilling Woods-Rocco Mediate duel during the U.S. Open at Torrey Pines, the epic Ryder Cup at Valhalla and baby boomers heading toward retirement with too much time on their hands. Clearly, opportunities to grow the game remain, or at least golf can sustain its place as a viable business and an essential American pastime.

But that will only happen if the sport changes its ways in a couple key areas.

The first area is time. Three PGA Tour golfers take about five hours on a typical weekday to play 18 holes. When fields are cut to 70 or so players for the weekend, they generally play in twosomes and take four hours to play.

Yes, they are playing for a lot of money and need to take their time, particularly with

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its ways to remain viable

green speeds pushing 13 feet on the Stimpmeter, meaning even a 2-foot putt can turn like a rail car. Regardless, the example they set is dreadful and the influence can be seen in today's fine young players, though it's not all their faults.

Courses have expanded since the 1990s to accommodate major distance gains off the tee and, as predicted in columns here ad nauseam, the effects proved disastrous with longer walks to tees, backups on holes where players are waiting for greens to clear and

more safety concerns. That confluence of negatives has trickled down to the everyday course, where houses once deemed safe are now in reach. Holes designed beautifully by their architects are not functioning properly, and worst of all, they are holding up play or even endangering lives.

Golf takes way too long to play and everyone knows it. Few can or want to make the five- or six-hour commitment away from family and work to whittle away so much time on the links. Today's attention spans just can't handle that long outdoors. Life is too short to spend it on the golf course, no matter how beautifully maintained it may be.

The game's administrators have done a miserable job addressing the issue on the professional level, which is vital in setting an example for the recreational level. The governing bodies shrugged off the effects of farther driving distances until it was too late, while the PGA Tour has not issued a slow-play penalty stroke in 16 years and shows little indication it plans to do so any time soon.

Innovative folks will continue to address the time component on the recreational level without help from the elitist fools who have the power to affect real change. Because it's almost impossible to speed up people and too costly to rework a course to accommodate technology, more creative approaches are necessary.

For starters, the nine-hole round must be treated with more respect. Thanks to computer technology, the handicap system allows for nine-hole rounds to be used to establish a handicap, removing much of the stigma once attached to this shortened version of the game. In an ideal world, we'd see

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New technology that creates unprecedented distance off the tees slows play and even endangers lives.

[ABOUT THIS SERIES] "Growing the Game" is *Golfdom's* quarterly series – now in its third year – that focuses on how the golf industry can attract more players to create more rounds. In addition to this installment on shaking the game from its six-hour obligation, we've also explored the impact women, minorities, disabled golfers and baby boomers could have on increasing play. We've talked to golf course architects about ways they can make the game more friendly for beginners and average golfers, highlighted creative marketing programs that golf courses use to attract new golfers, explored initiatives aimed to quicken the pace of play and examined golf club mergers.

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a premier match-play event with nine-hole round robins to show golfers that even truncated forms of golf have legitimacy.

As part of this time component, the golf facility must be reconsidered to grow the sport. Before developers plow up 18 holes to build another Home Depot, golf needs to develop sustainable models that not only remain financially viable for the owner but are also intriguing, fresh and interactive for the users.

The No. 1 complaint remains the time issue, particularly for families. The Harmon Club in Rockland, Mass., has solved this with a full-length nine-hole course by Brian Silva, complimented by a short-game course and practice area designed by Brad Faxon. Most importantly, the venue features a multi-purpose clubhouse with a 5,000-square-foot fitness facility.

With the 9-hole stigma removed, affordable facilities like this not only provide some-

thing for everyone, they are likely to be more-relaxed, family-friendly environments that will thrive in a society strapped for time.

"The Harmon Club is a great place to practice and has a very good nine holes to play," Faxon says. "It has it all, and you don't have to spend five hours there."

Perhaps future modifications to upscale daily fees or even country clubs will incorporate amenities like indoor course simulators, bowling, hiking trails and mountain biking.

Maniacal maintenance

Golf facilities also must rethink how they are maintained. Here's the part where we talk about going "green." Ironical, huh? All of these years of greening up your grass to please golfers, and now they are going to start demanding a green that has nothing to do with color.

Forget the environmental details for a moment. Consider golf's — forgive the business speak here — brand: vast spaces using up valuable resources and hurting the environment. Sorry, but that's how most of the world sees us.

Those in the golf business know that some of this is true, but not much of it. The game must refute these notions and demonstrate that golf courses are vital to the green movement.

These "vast" spaces need to become wildlife weigh stations and oxygen-producing refuges with thriving native-plants to showcase their environmental hipness and inspire people to associate themselves with the game instead of apologizing for its perceived sins.

There is little question that the next great American business opportunity is the green movement — assuming the corporate goons and political hacks can overcome their shallow climate change bickering to see a blossoming business opportunity.

Position yourself as green, and people will support you. The better job you do, the more people will pay to be part of it.

If golf courses are seen as old-style, gas-guzzling consumerists and an enemies of wildlife, then we will be left behind. Those well versed in solar cells and chill-beam technology are more likely to deliver the bottom-line results that course ownership will demand. They will

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The new American majority will embrace golf courses if those courses embrace a sustainable future.

also provide the image of golf courses as cutting-edge facilities with which Americans want to be associated.

"The challenge facing golf in the future is how we will deal with rising fuel, labor and 'amendment' costs in a business where margins are already thin," says golf course architect Scot Sherman, who has long taken an interest in the environment. "We just need to use less of everything. Although it may sound counterintuitive, we need to use new technology to get us back to more basic and less-costly operations."


Thankfully, there are cutting-edge members of the golf industry who have long been developing ways to save energy and water and implement sound integrated pest management programs, right?

Count on them changing, too. The generations demanding excessively green turf, ornate flowerbeds and soft soil will be slowly giving way to a new generation that demands a different kind of green. Potential new golfers will evaluate whether they want to associate themselves with the sport. Doing more for the environment only increases the

likelihood of attracting new blood.

The collapse of the financial markets and the increased understanding of climate change as motivation to embrace a different future seem to be ushering in a new majority of Americans looking to conserve and live a more ecologically sensitive life. But will it be enough to encourage golf facilities to make the investment in the sometimes-costly new technologies like electric mowers that will, forgive me, fuel a sustainable future?

"Although almost everyone in golf has experienced the recent pinch, I'm not sure there is much of a movement to improve the financial health of the game by thinking in new or even back to the old ways," Sherman says. "The only reason I can give is the abundance of ego in our game. There is almost too much ego in golf driving the bigger-is-better mentality, which would catch up with us all one day. Maybe the successful projects of the future will be done by the guy who steps back and says, 'Let's build a humble, little place to play golf where everyone will have fun and compete occasionally in a natural setting.' " ■



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