

A Young Person's Game?

The accusation has been made for a while. American golfers have gone soft. Years of pampering have caught up to the best and brightest of American golf.

It's an easy accusation to make and an even easier one to refute. Regarding the latter, just look at Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson and the U.S. Open champion Lucas Glover as examples of continued American superiority. And lest we not forget our boys who won the last Ryder Cup and our gals who won the most recent Solheim Cup.

But the future does not look bright. Maybe it's even time for the golf industry to ask why we are producing so many fine, but ultimately incomplete players.

Sure, I know you have too much on your plate trying to survive in this economy, but consider the numbers as of mid-July. On the men's side, five of top 10 players in the world were American, and just three of the top 10 on the women's side were American.

More disturbing are the ranks down the list. Just 18 of the top 50 players on the men's side are American, and a mere 13 of the women's top 50 were born and raised in the United States.

This, despite a thriving junior and college golf world and a Tiger-aided cool factor that has made golf more enticing to top athletes. And thanks to lax United States Golf Association rules on amateur status, burgeoning talents rarely pay for equipment anymore.

Programs such as The First Tee

THERE'S PLENTY WRONG WHEN IT COMES TO GROWING THE GAME AMONG OUR NATION'S YOUTH. AND, BOY, DOES IT SHOW

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



and countless others are managed by the many wonderful regional golf associations and are doing their parts to produce future generations of elite golfers.

We also know golf courses have never been better conditioned and practice facilities are more complete than ever before.

Throw in an improved understanding of the swing, physical conditioning, hi-tech club fitting, and it all should add up to better American players.

Yet, if you go to a junior or college tournament, it's hard not to think about what has gone wrong — mostly because the pace of play is so brutally slow, but also because you see such weak short games.

Even worse, many of today's younger players don't seem to understand how to play golf. To know when to lay up, to know when to hit three-wood off the tee and most of all, how to get up and down.

Imagination has always been a tricky thing in golf — too much and you're liable to notice every single thing that could go wrong. But even in the era of hi-tech equipment and soulless setups, the sport still requires a certain amount of craftiness to succeed.

Tiger and Phil remind us of this when they pull off miracle recoveries and jaw-dropping wedge shots.

Those two hucksters grew up at the end of the V-groove, persimmon, blade-iron era and before some of the hi-tech instruction made its way into the game. They also learned to play the game when it was cheaper and more accessible to juniors.

That's right, getting course time may just be what ails the American hopefuls. For all of the great things we do for the next generation, our clubs and public courses often restrict or discourage playing time.

Just poking around the new and excellent playgolfamerica.com's guide to junior golf rates will tell you all you need to know: Only a handful of courses in each state have signed up to promote their rates or even suggest a desire to have the kids around.

You'd think during these lean times that golf courses would take anyone's money. Even if it's a couple of bucks from a kid eager to be the next Tiger Woods.

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