

H-O-R-S-I-N-G Around

Certain on-course experiences resonate with golfers in transcendent ways. There is the free-swinging, late-afternoon round with just a couple of golf clubs and not a care in the world. And the buddies trip filled with laughs, friendly wagers and no shortage of trash talking. Or the chance to play somewhere new and to imagine a version of the game never before experienced.

In these lean economic times, the golf industry should look for everything it can to bring out the beauty and recreational pleasures of the sport. While we can't send everyone on a buddies trip to some new or special place or ensure romantic lighting every afternoon on a wide-open course, there are little ways we can re-imagine the game to rekindle the connection so many have made during those transcendent experiences.

My recommendation: H-O-R-S-E golf.

Anyone who picked up a basketball in his or her youth was exposed to H-O-R-S-E. If not, my apologies and a brief explanation about the game. It goes something like this: at least two players (but more if you'd like) take turns trying to out-imagine one another in a fun shootout.

Match play — with a basketball.

Say you have a game with two combatants. Player "Hogan" wins the honor in a coin toss and can shoot from anywhere on the court.

If Hogan makes the shot, then player "Snead" must make the same shot from the same position. If Snead

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misses, he receives "H" from the word H-O-R-S-E.

However, if Hogan misses his original shot, then Snead is free to choose a shot and Hogan must duplicate the feat. In this version of basketball match play, the contestants go back and forth until one loses when he's picked up all the letters in H-O-R-S-E.

The real fun in H-O-R-S-E comes from imagining wild and weird shots. And that's something seriously missing in modern golf, which takes itself way too seriously at the expense of fun, quirk and cool.

That's where H-O-R-S-E golf comes in.

While match play is a wonderful format used extensively in the everyday playing of golf, why not try spicing things up and use the tenets of H-O-R-S-E to rekindle the imaginative, childlike qualities of the game that endeared so many of us to golf in the first place?

Flip a coin, head to the tee and play a match with a friend where the player with the honor decides what tee you play from. If you want to take things a step further, dictate what club to use from the tee.

Maybe a short knocker takes advantage of the honor to dictate a

5-iron from the tee at a reachable par 5, neutralizing his longer opponent's strength while theoretically helping his own cause. Play until you've accumulated H-O-R-S-E or just use traditional match-play scoring.

Now, I know what most golf course superintendents and operators are already thinking: We don't need golfers jumping around to various tees. However, topping the list of golfer neuroses (after slow play) is their choice for tees they play. Nearly all are playing tees that are too far back.

As for traffic in places where you don't want it, most courses still have several tees that are overworked even with play down. So what if a couple of long-knocking flatbellies tee off from a forward tee in the heat of a H-O-R-S-E match?

Handicapping junkies are surely typing out an e-mail suggesting that such a match is tainted and therefore not suitable for posting to maintain an index. I say stuff it! The restrictions and oddities of handicapping have done as much damage as good to the game.

It's time to have some F-U-N.

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