

THINKING OUTSIDE THE TEE BOX



TO ENSURE THE FUTURE OF GOLF, INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS ARE TAKING CREATIVE MEASURES TO GROW THE GAME. BY KATY IBSEN

There is no way around it—golf has suffered.

In recent years golf has been put under a microscope for its loss of players and course closures. According to the National Golf Foundation, 107 golf courses closed in 2010, and 157.5 in 2011. Not to mention, during those two years, participation dropped by 1 million.

As the economy emerges from the recession, architects, superintendents, golf professionals and industry insiders are discussing ways that golf can become attractive again.

Rick Phelps, golf course architect and president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA), weighs in on the subject and why “out-of-the-box” thinking might be a means to an end in growing the game. The Colorado-based architect and owner of Phelps Golf Design considers the game’s demise a perfect storm.

“It’s not just that we’re losing players because of this or that or another thing,” he says. “It’s that the supply met up with the demand at the exact same time that the economy went in the tank, at the exact same time that golf had run its course as the popular sport. That all propped it up a little bit falsely in terms of what was really sustainable as far as numbers and real golfers.”

Despite that fact, Phelps believes that the game can be saved without being reinvented. As the ASGCA supports the PGA and the USGA, it says its worthy initiatives, such as Get Golf Ready and Play Golf America, ultimately will help

Continued on page 30



“We’re trying to offer things that make (golf) either A) more of a family activity or B) a shorter activity where you can get in and not miss the daily fun of the family.”

—Robert Carey, superintendent, Spring Brook CC, Morristown, N.J.



Growing the Game

Continued from page 28
the game survive.

Highlighting the PGA's Golf 2.0 program, Phelps says, "It involves basically going back out and attracting former golfers back into the game, through either lessons or discounted programs. It involves bringing new players into the game through junior golf programs, but also adult new golfer programs.

"As importantly," Phelps continues, "it's looking at the facilities themselves. This is where they are working with us as architects, is looking at the facility and saying, 'OK, what can we do with our facility to make it less intimidating?'"

Redesign for little to nothing

Phelps, whose designs include the Broadlands in Broomfield, Colo.; Devil's Thumb in Delta, Colo.; and Panther Creek CC in Springfield, Ill., explains that with players yearning for an end to the recession, now is the time for courses to plan. And yes, he says, they can afford an architect.

Architects can help courses and management assess their available resources, whether they be physical or financial. It's about identifying what can be done for little or no cost, Phelps says. "With a lot of courses you don't have to build anything, you just have to restructure how the course is operated," he adds.

Creating room for more executive-length or 3-hole courses would attract new golfers to the game, Phelps stresses. "We're sort of borrowing from the ski industry and using the term 'bunny slopes,' until we come up with something better," he says.

The shorter courses would enable beginners to acclimate to the game before playing a full round. Likewise, they would allow for different rules of play, making golf fun while inspiring players to learn the game's rules and format.

Osgood Golf Course in Fargo, N.D. has a short course. And it has seen participation grow every year since its opening in 2005. Head professional Lisa Schwinden attributes Osgood's growth to a few different things, including the "ABC" round. The



"With a lot of courses you don't have to build anything, you just have to restructure how the course is operated."

—Rick Phelps, president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, on how courses need to change their mindset on traditional golf

three-hole practice course complements the club's regular nine-hole executive course.

The three-holer, which costs \$5 to play, features two par 3s and a par 4. It has five tee boxes, some of which are for junior players who play from shorter distances.

"From that we get a ton of people out there, in really all different levels, not just beginners, but people who also want to play a quick three holes and that's it," Schwinden says.

The three-hole course is fast; a round can be played in 30 to 40 minutes and is ideal for beginners and juniors with a short attention span. Most importantly, the positive experience on the three-holer brings players back for Osgood's nine-hole course.

Private sector

Robert Carey, golf course superintendent at Spring Brook Country Club in Morristown, N.J., also has seen a desire for a shorter golfing experience. After finding members playing only 6 holes, with both the 6th and the 9th holes ending at the clubhouse, the club decided to actually promote the idea. As Carey explains, players don't have to be out there all day; they can be out there for an hour and 15 minutes and get 6 holes in.

"No longer is it my mom's generation where the kids were picked up and taken to practice.... It's more of a team effort now. And that's why we're trying to offer things that make it either A) more of a family activity or B) a shorter activity where you can get in and not miss the daily fun of the family," says Carey.

His club, however, sees another side to keeping players in the game, and it has little to do with the design of the course.

"We worry about membership numbers. We do our things to keep our members," he says of the private club. Instead of altering or adding to the course to make it easier for new and returning players, Spring Brook is finding ways to make the game more accessible.

The club has adapted to the new golfer lifestyle. It restructured membership dues and membership classifications, allowing more players to invest and play among their peers. The club offers 6:30 a.m. tee times for

twosomes on weekend mornings, which still allows players time to spend with their kids.

After seeing the market crash, and a dip in the membership in 2007, the club hosted a membership drive. "It was extremely successful. We're at a number of 300 people and a couple people on the waiting list," Carey says of the increase that went from 255 in just a year.

As for inviting potential new members, the club also has seen a great deal of excitement over its guest packages. A member can buy 10 guest rounds, and if they pay in full they receive a 20 percent savings.

Not golf

Taking the idea of the game's structure to a completely new level is a game called "Flogton." Launched in 2011 under the direction of the Alternative Golf Association, the program ("not golf" backwards) was developed to make the game more enjoyable for recreational players.

The AGA proposes that new, high-performance equipment and "fun-fostering" rules can bring a whopping 20 million golfers back to the game.

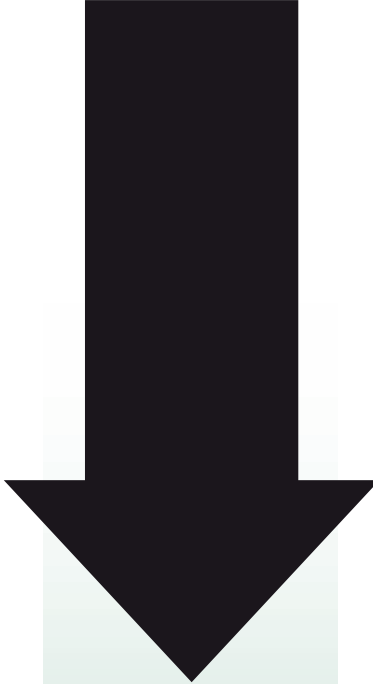
"I don't think the 20 million 'others' are mad at golf. They just have found other things to do with their time," asserts Alternative Golf Association Chief Executive Officer Pat Gallagher. "They don't care as much as golf thinks they should care. Golf hasn't done anything effective to bring them back."

Gallagher says it is entirely possible to develop cutting-edge equipment that will lure many of the 20 million recreational golfers back to the game. But he says it will require "a coordinated effort driven by innovation and endorsed by the opinion leaders in the game."

That said, the AGA is working with engineers, both inside and outside the industry, to develop new, inspiring gear that will expand players' games. This, coupled with new rules and formats under Flogton, will hopefully improve players' golf experiences.

Measurement of success

The PGA's and USGA's efforts to grow the game have been well received by the



"From (our three-hole course) we get a ton of people out there, in really all different levels, not just beginners, but people who also want to play a quick three holes and that's it."

—Lisa Schwinden, head golf professional, Osgood Golf Course, Fargo, N.D.



public, but Phelps emphasizes that more research must be done to identify trends in the game.

"The biggest thing that is missing, and has been missing, is that there's been no measurement of success," says Phelps. "There have been these initiatives for the past five to seven years and they come out with a new name or tagline every other year or so. But nobody has been able to put together a program or the resources to measure the success...how many are still playing?"

Schwinden, who doesn't have the resources to measure her programs, knows that it would be beneficial if she did. The LPGA/USGA Girls Golf Club she runs at the course has seen significant growth. What began with 30 women is now up to 200 participants in just five years.

As for retaining players, she says, "We're all for trying. Now that we've got these kids that are out there, it is to try and keep them in the game and playing."

Phelps suggests that courses run their last tee time at 4:30 p.m. and let families and beginners take to the course during final tee times.

"Is there something that we can do that would get rid of some (intimidation) or break the mold on some of that and have people be able to come out and relax, hit the ball a little bit and have some fun with their friends and go home happy?" asks Phelps.

Phelps comes from a golf family. His father, Dick, was president of the ASGCA in 1980, and his brother Scott is the CGCS at the Golf Club at Newcastle in Washington. For Phelps' term as president, he wants to focus on playability, affordability and sustainability of the game he loves.

"We're not trying to replace traditional golf. At this point it's trying to get people with clubs and balls in their hand learning to swing and learning to make contact with the ball and learning to have fun," says Phelps. "Eventually they will move on and learn to enjoy the game — the big game." ■

Ibsen, editor of Kansas! magazine, picked range balls in a previous life.