



# Problems of Nine-Hole Course Management

By S. P. Isaac

**Editor's Note:** *This should more properly be titled "From Across The Ocean" since it comes from England. It came to me, as so many excellent pieces do, by way of Jim Latham. It appeared in the April/May/June 1994 issue of SPORTS TURF BULLETIN.*

*Nine-hole courses are some of golf's greatest treasures in Wisconsin. This article gives some interesting thoughts about these golf courses. By the way, British spellings have been retained throughout, so please do not think the editor lost his dictionary.*

On the face of it, managing 9 holes should be no more difficult than looking after 18. However, there are factors, often inherent at the very concept of the golf course, which makes 9-hole course management more of a challenge. The decision to develop a site for 9 holes, as opposed to 18, usually relates either to a lack of space or finance. Generally, it is these basic constraints which follow through to produce management problems for the shorter course.

## The Poor Relation

There are many excellent 9-hole courses around the country but many golfers consider them the poor relation to 18-hole facilities. This perception is grossly unfair as some have as good, if not superior, quality of layout when compared with individual sets of 9 on 18-hole courses. To emphasize this point, the renowned golf writer Bernard Darwin described the 9-hole course of the Royal Worlington and Newmarket Club in Cambridgeshire as "a revelation", although this description related as much to the quality of the turf as to the layout. Although other courses may not deserve this epithet, any suggestion that there is a correlation between courses with holes numbering less than 18 and inferior playing quality cannot be substantiated. Indeed, if a 9-hole course is developed on land insufficient to support 18 there may be more room to design a superior course in terms of its playing qualities, assuming that the architect fully appreciates and capitalises on the opportunity. There are many 18-hole courses ruined because two or three holes have been squeezed into the available area.

Having argued the case for the shorter course, there is no doubt that 9-hole courses do have difficulty attracting visitors due to the perception of a standard 18-holes being desirable. This belief may, in part, be due to televised tournament golf where 9-hole courses are conspicuous by their absence. The supposed tedium of playing the same hole twice in a round may be another reason for the negative attitude to 9-hole courses taken by golfers. This can be overcome to a degree by having two sets of tees per hole, sited well away from each other to provide a totally different tee shot to fairway on par 4 and 5 or direct to the green on a par 3. This is only feasible where there is the available

spare ground, often a luxury not afforded to 9-hole courses.

Given the opportunity there are few 9-hole courses which would turn down the chance to expand to 18. This has happened to many clubs in recent years with the decline of agriculture and farmers removing the original land constraint making fields adjacent the course available, if often at inflated prices. For those courses comprising 2,500 to 3,000 yards and a Standard Scratch Score as low as 60, the option to go to 18 should perhaps be resisted if there is only the room to double the existing yardage, and it may make more sense to create a quality 9-hole layout with a better balance of par 3, 4 and 5 holes. There are some superb 9-hole layouts with a special character of their own which would be impossible to replicate through 18; it is not unknown for a good 9-hole to be ruined by adding on additional holes.

## Practical Problems

Even if only 9-holes are available, a round of golf still constitutes 18 and the consequence of this is double the wear for each hole on the shorter course. If room was a constraint in the concept of the 9-hole course it is unlikely that much thought will have been given to producing large greens, tees of adequate size and number or wide, diverse traffic flow routes. With a "double pass" of golfers playing a full 18 there will be greater tracking and chance of erosion around the same navigational routes. Those 9-hole courses having the luxury of playing from separate tees for corresponding holes on front and back nine, can see a reduction in localised wear damage if the layout provides for a variation in fairway landing area and approach from tee to fairway or green. A tighter layout provides less opportunity for diverting winter play, making trolley bans and traffic regulation more important to preserve the 9-holer through the winter. This question of access around the course has implications for machinery as well as golfers, concentrating tracking

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and limiting options for navigating the course. If the layout takes up most of the available room then maintenance vehicles may encroach more onto the playing areas of the 9-holer. Less room through the site may necessitate having to mow everything, an additional maintenance burden which many 18-hole courses negate by promoting banded rough and conservation areas.

With half the number of holes it will not take long for the 9-hole course to become choked with golfers first thing in a morning, leaving a minimum of time for important maintenance, e.g. greens mowing. On 18-hole courses play is occasionally staggered, golfers teeing off on 1 and 10 simultaneously, a practice which can give the well organised course manager a little leeway in keeping in front of golfers. This prospect is not ever afforded to the manager of a 9-hole course. Maintenance time for 9-holes is not half that of the 18-holer because the down-time, i.e. travelling around the course, manoeuvring around small greens and small tees, can take up a major proportion of management hours where there are fewer options for traffic movement. The manager of a 9-hole complex will also have more interruptions to his work through the day than will his 18-hole counterpart, the same number of golfers on each course will leave far more gaps for work when then are spread over the greater number of holes.

Golf courses developed on poor land or with poor quality materials will always perform badly in adverse weather and require constant attention, with drainage and aeration to provide playable conditions through all but the driest of months. Any such difficulties on an 18-hole course will be magnified on the shorter course as a consequence of traffic restriction. If finance was a constraint in the original decision to build 9, then the problems of attracting visitors and charging a large fee may ensure that inadequate resources are available to carry out necessary improvements and to repair damaged ground properly.

### Balancing the Budget

Essentially the same machinery range is required to look after 9-holes as for 18; a greens triple mower is still required to cut the greens however many there may be. At first glance it may be thought that hand cutting is more feasible on a 9-hole course, but the time factor, or lack of it, may make triple cutting essential. The only significant saving made in the maintenance budget will be for materials where half the top dressing, fertiliser and fungicide can make for a tidy saving, although the difference can be eaten up by increased costs for repairs. However, fertiliser and pesticide bills may not necessarily show a reduced level of expenditure, due to playing demands requiring a greater input to stimulate growth, compensating for the greater concentration of wear and possibly a greater level of disease control to weakened turf.

Equivalent costs with reduced income will not make the club's accountant a happy man and 9-hole courses will struggle when it comes to major outlays, e.g. irrigation, construction projects, and the purchase of large machines such as a Verti-Drain. In terms of promoting the course towards fulfilling its potential these are items which the 9-hole course will benefit from as much as, if perhaps not more than, an

18-hole but they can be a long time coming if not neglected altogether. Teeing grounds are possibly the one area on 9-hole courses which suffer most from wear and a lack of maintenance input often due to financial restriction. Irrigation to tees and enlargement may fall by the way when they are perhaps of greater necessity to courses where the same tees are played off twice in a round.

Let's not forget the men who actually do the spadework on the golf course, the greenkeeping staff. More often than not two men are asked to do to 9-holes what five, and sometimes six cope with on 18. Bearing in mind the practical drawbacks of maintaining 9-holes, this mathematical imbalance is exaggerated. There is also the major problem of holidays and sickness, at least there is some backup on the 18-hole facility.

### The 9-hole Dilemma

Nine-hole courses are handicapped from the outset by being subject to double the wear of their 18-hole counterparts. Charging lower fees to attract golfers, 9-hole courses must draw a greater number to bring similar revenue and the result can be a lack of resources to make up for heavier wear damage. The balance between desirable revenue and coping with a high level of play is a difficult one to achieve for any course, the restriction of circumnavigating 9-holes twice with duplication of wear routes makes the equation even more difficult. The unfortunate image that 9-holes tend to be saddled with, i.e. being the intermediary between the park pitch and putt and a full blown 18, if you like a stepping stone up the golfing ladder, is unjustified as the demands involved in looking after the shorter course are as great as those imposed on any course manager. A quality playing surface comes through sensible greenkeeping practices and the basics of course management are universal however many multiples of 9 holes are being overseen. Resources are the key to having the opportunity to fulfil the potential of any course and in this respect, the 9-holer is severely disadvantaged. ♣

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