



Pace of Play, No Easy Answers

By **David Brandenburg**, Golf Course Manager, Rolling Meadows Golf Course

It is not a secret that our busy lives are becoming a problem for the golf industry. In our rush culture not only do we not want to spend 6 hours doing the same activity we just do not have that amount of time to spend out on the links.

There are unlimited opportunities for our children, grandchildren or even us to be involved in extra curricular items. It is not a complaint because we enjoy these times with family and friends and hobbies but they all take time from the game of golf.

At the same time with our current economic challenges, many business owners and workers are spending more time bringing home a paycheck. In times of budget cuts businesses attempt to do the same work or even more with less employees and that often leads to extra hours at work.

I have heard a number of speakers over the past five years say time, not price is the biggest challenge the golf industry faces today. Price cuts do not give us more time.

The dreaded five hour 18 hole round becomes six or seven hours when you add travel to and from the course, warm up time and a little post round camaraderie after the game. A five hour round is slow, but I have played in a couple WGCSA events that I wished had taken five hours because it was more like five and half hours before we were done. If we as members of the golf industry cannot play in four to four and half hours how can we expect our customers to?

Often the task of speeding up



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play is left up to the golf marshal or ranger. This is one position on the golf course staff that has a difficult diplomatic responsibility even though it looks like they just drive around hawking golf balls all day. I know this because one, I have seven of them who work for me and two; I have pulled enough shifts on the ranger cart to know the truth. No not the truth about where the best ball hawking territory on the back nine is but the truth that in many cases there is not a dang thing you can do about slow play after it starts without offending someone. Even with the advanced title of Players Assistant, the ranger cannot perform miracles when the group that teed off at 8 am is just making the turn at 11.

The battle against slow play starts with course design or layout includes some course maintenance strategies, proper starting techniques and finishes with golfer education. So far that sounds easy, but mix a couple foursomes of high handicap players with a cooler full of adult beverages with three twosomes who like to play alone and fast and your Players Assistant has his work cut out for him.

Course design is an easy topic before construction starts but tough to change after the grand opening. Hindsight is 20/20, so it easy after the bulldozers are gone to say mistakes were made, but then it is to late. Owners and developers need to consider what type of players they want to attract and what kind in reality they will have, when hiring an architect and planning a course.

For the average daily fee club, long forced carries, blind shots or long walks from green to tee should be avoided. It is also important that multiple sets of tees are available to allow players to play a course that suites their game. Mounds and contouring should be gentle enough to allow mowing the rough with large rough mowers at 2.5" or less.

A resort course also needs multiple tees with less hazards in play from the forward tees, but considering most players ride a cart, the distance from tee to green can be increasd.

Existing courses have limited options for design changes because the low handicap golfers enjoy the challenges of forced carries or well placed bunkers and are usually not open to filling in hazards. One solution could be to add forward tees or shorten the most used set of tees to allow players to enjoy a course that is suited to their skills. Doing this can take some hazards out of play and provide a better experience.

Pay attention to where your golfers are hitting from or spending time looking for balls. Perhaps a natural area needs to be mowed back or the edge of a woods could be brushed out to allow players to find a ball and chip it back into play fairly easily. They often cannot advance the ball forward or hit a full shot so the penalty of the hazard is intact but play can keep moving.

Maintenance practices can also have an effect on pace of play. Just as in course design operators need to look at what kind of players they have and need to balance a playable course for less skilled golfers and a challenging course for better players. Long primary rough and lost balls are a major factor in pace of play. Superintendents can lower their primary mowing height or add a first cut of rough between the fairway height and primary height to allow for a little more room for error.

If you have the proper soils and turf types, dry fairways play faster than plush fairways. On the other hand, it also allows fades and draws to find the rough, but overall the more the ball can roll the better. This can be challenge for turf managers with heavy soils with poa annua fairways and older irrigation systems during the heat of summer.

Green speed effects pace of play at all course types. Most players say they want fast greens, but depending on the player quality or surface undulations 9 to 10 on the stimpmeter is pretty challenging for the average player. Private clubs where the players have a little more familiarity with those greens can exceed those levels.

Marking of the course and signage is often the responsibility of the maintenance staff. A private club can get by without tee signs or directional signs but daily fee and resort courses need to inform the golfer about where they are and where they are going. Be sure paths to the next tee are well marked, so golfers do not have to consider which way to go next. Provide an overhead shot of the hole on the scorecard or tee sign so unfamiliar players can quickly decide what route to take and what clubs to use.

Complete hazard marking is important for "serious" play but a

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limited amount of hazard stakes at every level helps in seeing the hazard from the hitting area and locating the ball.

Some courses offer multi-row yardage plates, however for the average player easily seen 100, 150 and 200 yard markers are a necessity. I have found a good combination with tags on our fairway heads for those players who expect that, and domed, mow over yardage plates that can be seen from the rough to give the player a quick estimation of what club to hit.

If the course is well designed, proper signage is in place and the links maintained to the standards set forth by the ownership or membership the only thing left is course rules and golfer education, which go hand in hand.

Communicating with the golfer at check-in is key to a good relationship. It not only makes the golfer feel comfortable at your facility but it allows the golf shop staff to alert them to any changes or unique situations on the course such as the cart policy, or maintenance that might interfere with normal play.

The golf purists will cringe but courses can suggest modified rules such as marked drop zones on holes that have difficult forced carries. A sign at the tee or notice on the scorecard can alert players of this option. Most daily fee and golf league players play distance on "out of bounds" shots rather than going back to the place the ball was hit from.

Playing "winter rules" for casual events and leagues speeds up play and is a common league rule. Our course posts summer and winter rules signs seasonally for those players who play by the rules, but for the recreational player, these rule modifications allows for a more pleasurable round.

Tee time intervals is something busy courses should consider as way to spread the players out,

and in turn reduce log jams on that first short hole. Tee time intervals vary from 7 to 10 minutes at most courses and even stretch up to 12 minutes at resort courses. The interval times are closely tied into revenue and pace of play. The 7 / 8 minute alternate intervals is popular to allow tee times to be the same every hour while starting eight foursomes per hour. At 10 minutes, only six groups can start per hour reducing potential revenue.

However, the 7 / 8 interval start although good for revenue, is bad for pace of play. If the 9 hole pace of play is two hours you have 64 players on 9 holes, and are reaching the max for common golfers all playing their own ball. At the two and a half hour pace of play you have 80 players on your 9 holes and outside of the first group none of them are happy because they are waiting on every shot.

Private and semi-private clubs have more control over players and pace of play enforcement than does a daily fee where the customers come and go. The clubs regular slow players can be coached by management or embarrassed into faster play by other players.

Courses should establish an average pace of play and base enforcement off that. The old adage, keep up with the group in front of you only works if the lead group sets a fast pace. A good easy idea I have read recently is placing a flag on the cart for the group that tees off at the top of every hour. The marshal staff can easily see where those carts are and identify problems early. At minimum, the marshal should have a copy of the tee sheet so they can track players out on the golf course.

The daily fee course or resort course has little option than to have a polite but firm pace of play

policy. Often a golf shop staff will receive as many complaints about slow play as they do rangers rushing golfers on the same day. Golf Rangers should be trained to greet all golfers early in their round to start a relationship with them. This helps later in the round when a group falls behind and needs to be encouraged to pick up the pace.

If a course wants to fix pace of play problems they have to have a policy with teeth without the constant fear of offending slow players. In reality, slow players are ruining the day for all the groups piled up behind them, and should be given a limited amount of courtesy.

It should be clear the key to pace of play is the necessity for golf clubs to decide what type of players or members they want to attract. From that decision course design, maintenance practices, local rules and signage can be planned accordingly. A golf course cannot be all things to all people and should cater to their core group while providing options for the other players. 🌱

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