

“Today’s great experience will be tomorrow’s expectation”

# The Golf Paradox

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When did golf become an industry?

Years ago golf was a game, a simple pastime. Technology, maintenance, golf course design, television contracts, apparel, real estate and print media each have a profound influence on the game. Each has altered the industry, transformed the industry and changed the game. Club manufacturers and the PGA tour have had the most influence. Their decisions have had wide-felt implications, and the game is now playing “catch-up” to club technology and maintenance expectations.

What’s the result? The industry is now driving the game. Unreasonable expectations for maintenance standards, service, and play have drastically changed the face of the game over the past 30 years. Club manufacturers suggest that golfers can play the same equipment as the professional and therefore play as well. The PGA tour averages drives at an average of 300 yds or more. This is the single-most important issue facing golf today. Weekend golfers see this and expect similar results. Ask any average golfer what his average driving distance is and his reply will likely be a lie.

Maybe more importantly, the tour shows golf courses with immaculate conditions and spectacular manmade features [waterfalls, streambeds, retaining walls and rock outcroppings] establishing costly expectations for the new golf courses. Expectations grow beyond reason while the industry suffers and the average player is losing out. The soul of the game has been stripped bare and there is little left of the nuisance, thought, strategy, companionship, or the simple beauty of the game. Can we rationalize the trend toward a bigger, more expensive and prestigious golf industry? And what are the ramifications of getting bigger, more complex, or more ‘industrialized’?

We may as well build 1000 TPC courses with all the same hazards in the same locations with the same length and an island green, so we can mindlessly dial in a yardage. Owners are compelled to build golf courses that stretch to 7,600 yards to compete with the neighboring 7,400 yard monster. I read the other day that by the end of the decade, the PGA will have an event at an 8,000 yard course. Great. More land is needed, wider fairways and more earthwork necessary. Just what this game needs.....tougher play expectations with water hazards, deeper bunkers and faster greens.

Any industry changes and morphs and directs its resources to meet the market need. But understand that the larger the industry, the more scrutiny will be necessary. Scrutiny invites calibration and calibration provokes standardization. Is the golf industry ready for standardization?

## Can golf be standardized? [sanitized]

The game of Golf and Golf Course Architecture is now governed by numbers. Everything is measured or standardized. Everything from "slope", course ratings, stars, yardages, ball spin rates, fairway acreages, score, affordability, awards, rounds, percolation rates, gpm, dilution rates, stimpeters, handicaps etc. You cannot exist in this industry without a basic understanding of these issues.

This is the great dilemma. How do we accurately determine the positive effects of the game while the standards become more definitive? Is it the beauty?; Is it the maintenance?; The length?; Shot values? Walk-ability? Resistance to Scoring? Or the intangible "enjoyment factor"? As much as the course critics have tried, numbers can't measure the game of golf or golf courses! So, we end up valuing the 'product branding' over the game itself.

The problem is that the dialogue about the game has been reduced to these issues, rather than on the game itself. How can standards begin to measure something that uses few principles to calculate the greatness of a golf course or the pleasure of a round with friends or family.

All golfers want a fun and beautiful challenge. But we aren't providing a fun challenge anymore. We have designed to create challenge and difficulty rather than accommodate playability. We have designed length to accommodate par rather than designing risk/reward to accommodate strategy. We have constructed golf courses to meet an aesthetic....to market the "look" rather than to "meet the market".

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I've explored the culprit of our current industry crisis and I have come to the conclusion that it can be traced to the father of modern golf course architecture...a Robert Trent Jones Sr. quote about an architect's role to "protect par". His simple, trivial and seemingly straightforward quote has prompted a genetic change in the game. Golf is now about protecting par with yardage, difficulty, more daunting, more picturesque and even 'more fair' courses. Yardages increase; technology responds, maintenance budgets soar, expectations expand.

Need evidence. Look at the changes to Augusta National: a great golf course by any standard. Augusta National was a great 'Match Play' golf course. Any golfer could win with shot making; with an understanding of the golf course; with strategy and imagination; with solid approaches and deft putting. Golden Age Architects like MacKenzie, Ross and Tillinghast used these principles when they designed a golf course. Let the golfers imagination dictate play. But by lengthening the course, the officials at Augusta played right into the hands of the stronger and longer players. It wasn't Tiger Proofing, it was Tiger Submission.

Longer golf courses with higher maintenance standards and higher fees are causing the game to lose. So here's the bottom line. Is golf growing? No, it's worse .... **Golfers are choosing not to play.** Why? Golf is too hard; Golf is too expensive; and Golf takes too much time. To keep up, courses spend more money to update a facility, usually by making it tougher, longer or more demanding....and the result is that costs rise and golfers opt out.

Can the industry grow [or even survive] without golfers? Obviously not. This industry has to grow to survive, and that means encouraging golfers to try, learn and play more golf. This won't happen given the current expectations and perceptions of golf and golfers.

## The Solution

Golf Courses should be designed constructed and rated based upon the ability to encourage/enjoy match play. This was the game as invented. Reviewing and playing a golf course based upon one simple criteria.....its ability to demand intriguing match play events is somewhat radical and simultaneously effortless.

Donald Ross' elaborate and subtle designs were meant for match play. He rarely made reference to par...match play was fundamental for golfers ability and architect creativity. The following is an excerpt from "Form over Function".

"...If a course with the quality of Pinehurst #2 were built today, one that had great shot values and design features but little fizzle or flashy eye appeal, would it be well received by golfers and writers and resort owners? The expectations people have today for instant visual impact, the 'wow' factor, suggest to me those day are gone."

So, the solution won't be found in club technology, or better teachers, or range finders, carts maintenance, fungicides, wall to wall irrigation, caddies, big [or small] clubhouses, waterfalls or even "fairness". The answer resides in golf's soul..... Match Play.

Match Play would eliminate the need to review a course based upon length. Hazards would be reviewed based upon strategy, rather than penalty. Par is not a main topic because play would be recognized for options and tact, not sheer strength and length. Tee locations are based upon strategy rather than length. The flight of a golf ball no longer is an issue, because shorter holes are now highlighted.

Priority would be placed on "working the ball", rather than launching it. Golf would be played against an opponent and the golf course rather than against par, as it was meant to be. Fun would be based upon play, rather than scores in relation to par. Handicaps would still have merit, but not receive so much significance. Mostly, the personality or quirkiness of a given course would be revered, rather than criticized.

Bradley Klein acknowledges the value of Match Play in his article of Golf Week September 11, 2004. "Great golf course architecture owes an unacknowledged debt to match play. Yet those players today who expect courses to be "fair" are, by contrast, rooted in a stroke-play mentality that makes distinctive architecture impossible to achieve."

Mostly, the 'expectations' that have been generated over the last 40 years of golf industrialization would be moderated. All types of golf courses could coexist, from high end to affordable as long as the facility meets these adjusted expectations of a great golf experience.

Golf Course Architects have fought hard to reduce the impacts of club technology. But we must work harder and analyze more. The benefits of golf reach beyond its physical borders. The social and cultural implications of golf can have deeper and more profound impacts if we find and value the soul of the game. Golf is difficult enough...let's not complicate it more. With a slight adjustment in perspective, golf can rediscover itself, its soul, and become a simple game again. Let's let the game drive the industry.