

A Tee Too Far

Long Courses
Overmatch Golfers;
Trying a New Way
February 16, 2008; Page W1

The U.S. Open this June at Torrey Pines in La Jolla, Calif., will be played on a course about 7,600 yards long, par 71, with narrow fairways, deep rough, penal bunkers and greens so fast ball markers will be at risk of sliding off. That's a pretty intimidating setup even for the world's best players. For the other 99.999% of golfers, it's absolutely ridiculous.

"For most players, the back tees on any course should be just a rumor," says Jeff Brauer, a Texas-based golf architect who, whenever possible, hides the longest tees on the courses he designs so that average golfers won't be tempted. Often he positions them behind trees or mounds.



Mark Skillicorn

The average drive of a 90s-shooting male golfer is 192 yards. He thinks he hits the ball 30 yards farther than that, according to a survey of more than 18,000 golfers completed three years ago by Frank Thomas, the former technical director for the U.S. Golf Association. In fact, the survey found that 41% of men estimate they hit their drives 250-plus yards, which hard data from club manufacturers expose as total balderdash; in reality, maybe only one in 50 golfers routinely hits drives 250 yards. Senior men are lucky to coax 170 to 180 yards out of their tee shots. Typical female golfers drive about 135 yards.

If golf were somehow to reinvent itself from scratch, reflecting how the vast majority of participants actually play the game today, the default tees at courses would play at 5,700 to 6,300 yards. The forward-most tees, for beginners, some seniors and some women, would be at around 4,100 yards and get lots of use, and some courses would provide alternative tees set at, say, 6,700 and 7,200 yards, for the relatively few crack youngsters and low single-digit handicappers who can comfortably manage that length. (Scratch golfers constitute only 0.65% of the total.)

Those, at least, are the idealized dimensions of golf courses envisioned by a cadre of golf architects and thinkers who argue that most current courses aren't meeting the needs of everyday players. "The standard model, with tees at 7,000, 6,700, 6,400 and 5,600 yards, are too short for the pros and too long for almost everybody else," says Mr. Brauer.

PODCAST



More golfers are attempting to play from the longest tees possible, slowing down play for everyone. The Journal's Golf Columnist John Paul Newport explains why more golfers are engaging in this practice and what can be done to stop it. [Listen to the podcast.](#)

Such courses simply aren't as much fun as they should be, especially when golfers are goaded by custom, peer pressure and design cues (such as cart-path routing and the color of the tee markers) to play from distances ill-suited to their games. The result is unnecessary frustration and excruciatingly slow rounds.

In the last two decades, designers have done a better job adding more, and more thoughtful, forward tees. The problem is getting people to use them, especially macho-oriented men who insist they "want to see the whole

course" even when they can't come close to reaching many par-four greens in two shots. Such players, by requiring an extra full shot on 14 or more holes, can add 30 to 45 minutes to the length of a round, slowing down everyone behind them.

There is some evidence, however, that more golfers (in particular, aging baby boomers) are starting to accept that shorter tees can be more fun. Tony Maramarco, for example, is a 10-handicapper from Massachusetts who persuaded his buddies last summer to play from shorter tees during an excursion to Cape Cod. "It was universally agreed that, more often than not, we had equally challenging second shots, but with four irons and eight irons instead of three woods and six irons," he says.

"Architects used to believe that the male ego wouldn't accept tees less than 6,000 yards," said Mr. Brauer. "But now some courses are finding that they lose business if senior players don't see tees at 5,700 yards on the scorecard."

That distance, however, may not be short enough, according to Arthur D. Little, the grand-nephew of the founder of the famous management consulting firm. In 1996 he and his wife, Jann Leeming, after twin careers in venture capital and other businesses, purchased a modest golf course in Maine called Province Lake and, being analytical sorts, set out to understand why more people weren't playing it.

The Little Family Foundation commissioned the research by Mr. Thomas, cited above, and based in part on those data the couple wrote a white paper recommending a simple yet radical system of repositioning tees.

The traditional method is to place the different tees on each hole so that the drives of all players end up in the same area. The scratch players from the back and the duffers from the front would all be left with, say, 160 yards to the green of a par four. But a 160-yard eight iron for a scratch player is quite a different matter than a 160-yard shot for an elderly man with a slow swing speed, who might not be capable of reaching the green from that distance even with a three wood.

The Little-Leeming system seeks to position the tees so that players of all abilities will be hitting their approach shots into greens with similar clubs, not from similar distances. The elderly man above might use an eight iron just like the scratch player, but from 100 yards instead of from 160 yards. A woman might be hitting eight iron from 90 yards.

"You still have to hit the shot, but this way everyone has the same opportunity to reach the green, and everyone has fun," says Mr. Little.

Province Lake had land enough only for four sets of tees, from 6,279 to 4,169 yards, but the experiment worked. Within three years rounds more than doubled, women's play grew to a third of the total, and the speed of play improved by 15 to 30 minutes a round, even on the busiest days. A handful of other courses, such as Rock Harbor in Winchester, Va., have had success with similar specs.

There are practical limitations to this approach, but the success at Province Lake, and the appearance recently of other new types of short and family courses, such as a six-hole Davis Love III design in the Florida Panhandle, suggest Mr. Little and Ms. Leeming may be onto something.

Try it yourself, as an experiment. Move up one or two tees from where you usually play and see what it's like having shorter irons into the greens and more makeable birdie putts. My guess is you'll have more fun.

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