



# MOVE FORWARD, NOT BACK!

Back tees add challenge for a few, but forward tees bring fun to more players.

BY LARRY GILHULY

**Y**ou have completely warmed up and are ready for a challenging round at the golf course. After hitting your longest drive and fairway wood on the opening par 4, you are faced with a mid to long iron for your third shot. Maybe a shot at par, but probably a bogey or double-bogey start. Tough opening hole! On to the second hole, a truly difficult par 5. After a career drive and two massive fairway woods, you still have a mid to short iron just to make the green in four. Looks like another bogey or worse! Oh well, it can't be this tough all day. On to the third hole, an uphill par 3 that is unreachable with a driver and has a bunker stretching across the front of the green. With a good chip, maybe a par, but a birdie putt is out of the question. This game is challenging, but isn't it also supposed to be fun?

As a typical male player, how would you like to be put in this position every time you play your home golf course? It would probably get pretty old, pretty quick. Well guess what? The above scenario is played out day in and day out at most older golf courses where the forward tees offer a golf course for the lady players that is far too long

for their skill level and certainly not conducive to a *fun* round of golf. Think this is a new problem? In 1949, Miss Margaret Curtis (three-time Women's Amateur Champion and co-donor of the Curtis Cup) stated, "We women play our golf on courses laid out for men. Our games are thus under the decided handicap of being misfits." (*USGA Golf Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 7, Winter 1949, pp. 10-11.)

## WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Several years ago, the NGF (National Golf Foundation) conducted some very interesting research that showed the following three facts:

- The best lady players hit a golf ball approximately 85% as far as men.
- The average lady player hits a golf ball only 75% as far as men.
- The average driving distance for the average lady player is 140 yards.

So what's the problem? The problem is simple. Many older golf courses force women golfers to play a golf course that is exceedingly long for their ability, and this takes much of the fun out of

Forward tees are challenge enough for many players who would only be discouraged if they had to use back tees.

### Comparative Distance Chart

Women's Yardage	Comparative Men's Yardage
6,000 yards	$6,000 \div 0.75 = 8,000$ yards
5,750 yards	$5,750 \div 0.75 = 7,667$ yards
5,500 yards	$5,500 \div 0.75 = 7,333$ yards
5,250 yards	$5,250 \div 0.75 = 7,000$ yards
5,000 yards	$5,000 \div 0.75 = 6,667$ yards
4,750 yards	$4,750 \div 0.75 = 6,333$ yards

the game. This group has no choice; they play markers that are too long with no diversity in club selection and they have little chance to enjoy par, let alone birdies!

While many golf courses have this problem, it doesn't stop with the lady players. Consider the other groups that are affected if your golf course offers a forward set of markers that is too long:

- **Senior men players.** Let's face it. The ego of most male golfers will not allow them to play from the "ladies'" tees, despite the very same situation described in the opening paragraph of this article. Senior players naturally lose distance over time; thus, they should also move forward to enjoy a golf course that is more suited to their game. That length can be found at the current length of the forward markers, generally in the 5,600- to 6,000-yard range. Unless an additional *option* of forward tees is added to address the ladies, the men will not move forward. However, when these tees are added, the response at most golf courses has been positive.
- **Junior players.** If the goal of your golf course is to make the game grow, it is best to provide a golf course that is less intimidating for the younger golfer. As these players grow older and become stronger and more proficient, they can easily move back.
- **Beginning players.** Those of you who have fallen for this maddening addiction known as golf understand the difficulty of the game and the inner joy it can provide. Why not make it more popular and fun at your golf course by adding forward tees that make the game easier for beginning players? As the beginners become more advanced, the *option* is available to move back.
- **Nine-hole women.** The players in this ever-increasing group generally enjoy their time on the golf course, but they do not desire another nine holes of difficulty. Forward tees offer a great option for this group of players and may encourage some to go the full 18.

### HERE COME THE OBJECTIONS!

The idea of adding forward tees to give *all players the option of different yardage markers* is very logical and reintroduces more fun into the game for a majority of your players. The cost of tee construction and maintenance is a consideration that may not make this possible for all golf courses. However, despite the preceding statistics and comments, it is amazing how fast and strong the objections arise when this concept is discussed at many courses. Surprisingly, the objections do not come from the male side. In most cases, the most vocal and adamant dissenting voices come from the very group that the tees will assist — the women! As stated by Miss Curtis, "In the main, men's golf committees have been very sympathetic to women's needs. The fault has been that the women usually haven't realized or asked for what would be good for women's golf." Let's look at the objections and offer answers to each concern:

- **"The new tees will make the course too short!"** Players who are at or near a single-digit handicap generally express this objection. Of course the golf course will play shorter, and those who hit the ball longer actually will hit mid-short irons to par 4s and have birdie putts on numerous holes. At the same time, the shorter hitter now will enjoy the thrill of a par or the occasional birdie.

While on the subject of course length, let's take a close look at the "comparative distance" chart for men and women. Using the "75% Rule" described earlier, a 6,000-yard golf course for women stretches to an unbelievable comparative distance of 8,000 yards for men ( $6,000 \div 0.75 = 8,000$ ). Now who in their right mind would design a golf course to play 8,000 yards from the regular tees for men? More important, who would want to play such a creation? Only the best single-digit handicap players! For this reason alone, many golf course architects, with Alice Dye at the forefront, recommend the forward tees at 4,800-5,200 yards to give a comparative distance of 6,400-6,900 yards for women.

- **"Forcing the women to play a golf course that is much shorter will change our handicaps!"** This is simply not true. If this were the case, all male players have artificially low handicaps if they play the traditional 6,000- to 6,300-yard white markers instead of the back tees. The USGA Slope and Course Rating systems are designed to provide a lower slope and course rating from shorter tees, thus lower scores will not

change your handicap. They will, however, change your enjoyment of this difficult game!

- **“Playing the new forward tees will put us at a disadvantage when we play our intra-club match with XYZ Country Club!”** If your handicaps don’t change, how can you be at a disadvantage?

- **“We have polled our women’s group and there is overwhelming support to keep the current forward tees at 5,800 yards!”** Let’s get this straight. Women who hit a golf ball on the average no more than 140 yards with a driver prefer to nearly always putt for bogey or worse and always play shots from the same area? We are expected to believe that there is a high level of excitement when hitting yet another fairway wood or when leaning over to make that 10-foot double-bogey putt? Why not give your players the option of a shorter course to add more interest in your golf course and its players? Do you honestly believe that the majority of women players at your 5,800-yard (national average) golf course prefer to play a course that is 7,733 yards when compared to the men’s course? By educating your players with facts, why would anyone not want an additional set of forward tees to let players have the option of playing at their real skill level?

## WHAT’S THE SOLUTION?

Does your golf course/club sound like the preceding description? Are those making decisions focused on improving the back tees or making the course “stronger”? Does your women’s group strongly oppose this idea? If so, the following four steps can be taken to introduce this concept at your golf course.

- **Determine if the need exists.** This is the easiest part of the process. Take a look at the overall distance of your forward tees. If they are in excess of 5,300 yards (7,066 comparative yards), you are a candidate for improved forward tees. Above all, get the point across that the new forward tees are an addition and not a replacement for the existing forward tees.

- **Hire a qualified golf course architect to assist in the placement of the tees.** This point cannot be overemphasized! A qualified golf course architect will use professional experience in placing the tees in the proper position while taking distance, angle of play, and hazards into account. In some cases, the desired distance may place the tee directly in visual or playing conflict

with the original tees; thus, an architect will be helpful in this regard. Also, using an outside authority removes individual preferences that can result in improper tee locations. Finally, as Miss Curtis stated in her 1949 article from *Golf Journal*, “The crux of this problem isn’t the drive but the shot to the green and the trajectory (isn’t it a grand word) of the ball — what club should be used and what club is used by the Good Women for that shot?”



In regard to the lengths of individual holes, Alice Dye recommends the following:

- **Par 3s: 60–150 yards.** According to Ms. Dye, par-3 holes with a fairway and an entrance to the green may run up to 150 yards. Although not reachable with a driver by the average player, this would leave only a short pitch from a fairway lie. Most golf course architects try to design the par 3s with one long, one short, and two medium-length holes to provide players with a diversity of challenges. Unfortunately, many older golf courses provide three or four long holes from the forward tees.

- **Par 4s: 240–340 yards.** Based on the average drive of 140 yards and a second shot of 120 yards, any hole over 260 yards is unreachable in two for the average woman player. A hole measured at 340 yards will leave the player with an iron approach for the third shot and a chance for a one-putt par. Holes longer than 340 yards will generally require three woods and little chance for success or fun.

- **Par 5s: 401–420 yards.** Par-5 holes are generally unreachable in three by all but a very small minority. For example, the average woman would hit a 140-yard drive followed by two 120-yard fairway woods, leaving another 60 yards to a 440-yard par 5. If the hole is uphill, less than 401 yards can be utilized, but this should be determined by your golf course architect.

In addition to the preceding recommendations by Ms. Dye, she offers another compelling reason why many of the older courses have such long

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holes from the forward tees. Most of the older courses were designed in an era when irrigation was added only for the greens and tees. Fairway irrigation was unheard of; thus, golf courses were designed with *ball roll* in mind. Today's demands for verdant green fields has resulted in far less ball roll and much longer golf courses. Adding forward tees will actually return most of the older golf courses back to the architect's original intent.



Many older golf courses force women golfers to play a golf course that is exceedingly long. This can take much of the fun out of the game.

- **Create a long-range program, rather than adding tees in a “piecemeal” manner.**

Based on the experience of numerous golf courses, the best way to approach this concept is through a complete long-range plan completed by a qualified golf course architect. This can be a portion of a complete course master plan or a separate issue. Regardless, completing one hole at a time to “test the waters” is a sure way to drown!

- **Be careful when selecting the color for the tee markers.**

Golfers are creatures of habit and nowhere is this seen more than in the colors used for tee markers. For better or worse, red designates the “ladies” tees, white is for the regular “men’s” tees, blue generally marks the “tournament” tees, and black is

for the “championship” markers. During the past decade attempts have been made to eliminate these names with limited success. Many courses have added “gold” markers to nudge senior men forward with equally limited success. If you should add a complete set of forward tees, keep the red markers forward, followed by white, blue, gold, and black. In this sequence, the average ladies have the choice of red or white, while senior players are far less reluctant to play the new white tees.

### **BUILD 'EM RIGHT!**

Now that you have gone through the entire process of possibly adding a set of forward tees to add more fun into the game for shorter hitters, the actual construction of the tees must occur. Let's face it. We have all played or seen golf courses where the forward tees are little more than an afterthought. The size of the forward tees does not need to be large (1,000-2,000 sq. ft.), since the majority of players using these tees do

not cause nearly the amount of damage compared to their male counterparts. Also, the amount of play on these tees does not warrant large surfaces that will do little more than use valuable labor for mowing and other operations. However, as with any tee on a golf course, the same amount of care should be given during construction. Specifically, the tees need to be well drained with good sand-based mix and internal drainage. Without internal drainage, seepage usually occurs on the tee perimeters, causing wet areas for mowers or, worse yet, in the entry and exit points for players. The surface should be as level as possible, and it should be seeded or sodded with turf that is grown on the same type of sand to avoid layers. Finally, your golf course architect should design contours that blend into the surrounding area. Hopefully the days of small “push-up” tees that send the wrong message are over!

### **SUMMARY**

During the boom phase of golf in the '90s, golf courses were being built at a rate for the expected growth of the game. This growth has flattened off recently, leading many golf courses into an unexpected competitive situation with other nearby public, private, and resort courses. At a time when the game (and your course) should be welcoming new players, shouldn't we focus on making the game less difficult for these players rather than “stiff-arming” them out of the game? The addition of shorter forward tees is noted at virtually every new golf course built during the past decade. Why shouldn't it be when NGF reports that 25% of all golfers and 41% of new golfers are women! While forward tees are found at nearly all of the newer golf courses, a definite trend has also been noted at older golf courses that have seen the positives that a shorter course represents. In addition to the previous points, the addition of a set of forward markers speeds play and reduces overall fairway acreage, as fairway mowing can start further away from the existing forward tees. It also has the added agronomic advantage of spreading play over more teeing area. Despite initial misgivings voiced by some, forward tees have proven popular to most average players, with many couples reporting that they are finally playing the same course. Whether this leads to more marital bliss or strife remains to be seen!

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