

Addressing The FUNdamentals of Tournament Golf

Golf is an inherently challenging game, and tournament conditions can make it even tougher. Fortunately, tournament play can still be fun when key factors are taken into account.

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Tournaments introduce golfers to a different side of the game, whether they are playing or spectating.

Imagine standing on the first tee, ready to play in an important tournament. You realize every stroke will count. For the next few hours you will battle nerves, anxiety, and possibly the loss of feeling in your hands. Sound fun? For some it is great fun — it's what they live for. But for many others, playing in a traditional golf tournament just doesn't seem worth the stress. Fortunately, tournament golf is flexible. It can be organized to focus on meeting new people or experiencing a different playing format, all while playing in a reasonable amount of time and having FUN.

This article we will demonstrate how facility decision-makers have a great influence on the golfer experience

during a tournament by the format chosen, the type of golfers playing, the way the course is set up, and how pace of play is managed. By better understanding the tournament experience for experts to beginners, decision-makers can make tournament golf FUN for more golfers. They may even be able to attract new golfers by engaging them in another dimension of golf.

COURSE SETUP CONSIDERATIONS

Before embarking on the entire discussion of how to make a tournament challenging and fun, ask yourself this simple question: "Have I ever played in a tournament of any kind where the

course setup was too easy?" If you answer yes, the next question should be: "Will I ever play that course again?" Your answer to the first question might be no, but quite commonly the answer to the second question is yes even if you thought the course setup was too easy.

Now reverse the question: "Have I ever played in any tournament where the course setup was too hard?" If you have, did it make you want to play that course again? This gets to the very core of the issue. If a tournament is intended to produce a good experience that will benefit the long-term economic viability of the golf facility, great care should be taken to make sure the golf course isn't too difficult.

As you prepare for your next tournament, ask yourself these basic questions:

WHAT IS THE GOAL OF THE TOURNAMENT ORGANIZER?

A well-known golf course superintendent in the Pacific Northwest once shared his philosophy for setting up the biggest tournament at his golf course every year: “The goal is to treat the golfers to a well-maintained golf course that is not too much different from the one they always play. With a wide variance in handicaps, it makes no sense to set up the golf course to play too hard. After all, the primary focus of most tournaments is to have fun with your friends, enjoy the competition, and get done in a reasonable amount of time. Setting up the golf course with lightning-fast greens, difficult hole locations, and deep rough only leads to a slower pace of play and less fun for the entire field.”

Tournaments can range from highly competitive events with a focus on identifying the best player to local charity events with a focus on having fun. For this reason, tournament organizers and golf course superintendents need to fully understand the impact they can have on how an event is played.

WHO’S PLAYING AND HOW DO THEY PLAY?

Knowing the range in ability among the golfers playing in a tournament is an essential part of successful course setup. Courses can be set up to play extremely difficult for tournaments that have a field of low-handicap players, but when the field has a wide range of handicaps, course setup should focus on the middle third of the field — not the best or the worst.

Figures 1 and 2 show the handicap distributions for every male and female golfer with a USGA Handicap Index. Note that the middle third of the handicap distribution range is approximately 10-15 for males and 22-29 for females.

While being aware of handicaps is important, it is also important to understand how far golfers hit the ball. Table 1 presents data published in the 2017 [USGA and R&A Distance Report](#). The

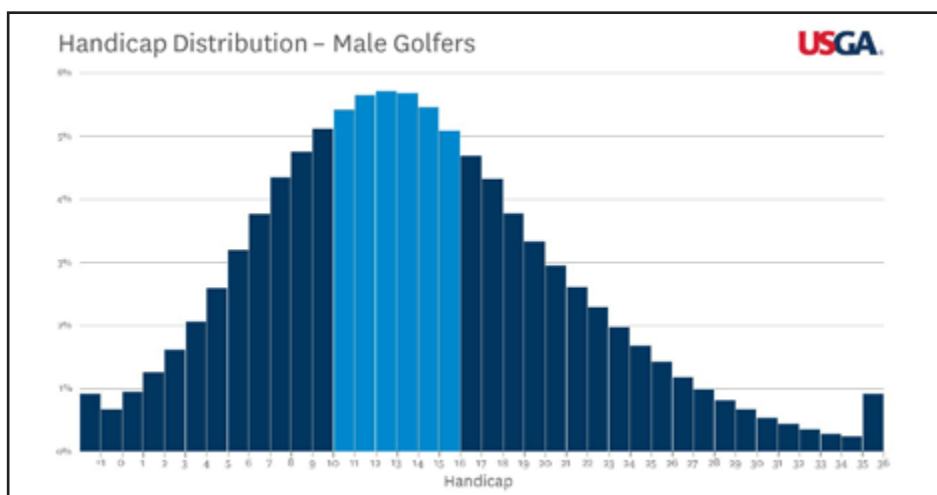


Figure 1: The distribution of handicaps for male golfers in the Global Handicap and Information Network® centers around a median of approximately 13, meaning about 50 percent of male golfers have a handicap higher than 13. The light blue bars indicate the middle one-third of the distribution of handicaps.

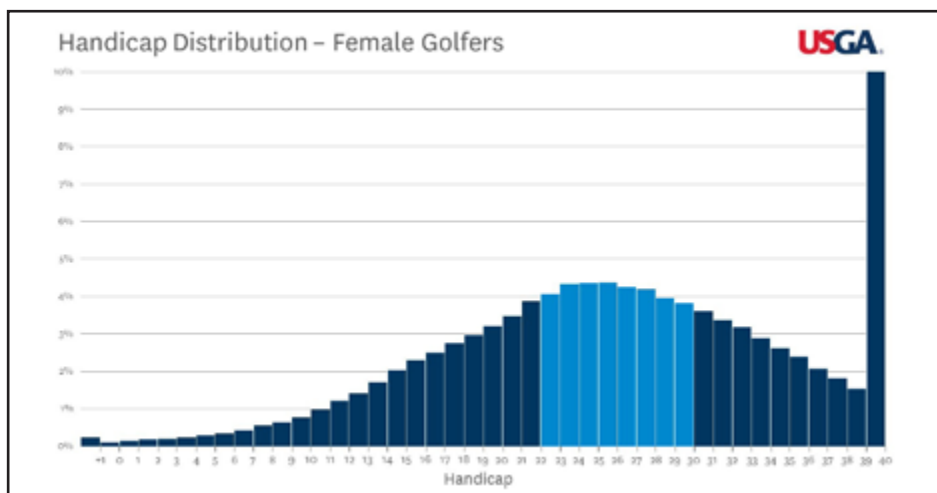


Figure 2: The distribution of handicaps for female golfers in the Global Handicap and Information Network® centers around a median handicap of approximately 25, meaning about 50 percent of female golfers have a handicap higher than 25. The light blue bars indicate the middle one-third of the distribution of handicaps.

Table 1. Average drive distance in yards						
Handicap	<6	6-12	13-20	21+		Overall
Male	236	212	198	188		208
	±2.7	±1.5	±1.9	±3.6		±1.1
Handicap	<6	6-12	13-20	21-28	29-36	Overall
Female	195	177	150	136	118	146
	2.5	1.4	1.2	1.1	1.8	0.8

Table 1: Understanding how far golfers of different skill levels hit the ball is helpful information when preparing a course for a tournament that hopes to maximize enjoyment for all golfers. Source: [The 2017 R&A and USGA Distance Report](#).

data outline the average drive distance for male and female amateur golfers separated by Council of National Golf Unions handicap. The overall average drive distance was 208 yards for male golfers and 146 yards for female golfers. While there are many factors to consider regarding course setup, course length is a critical one that alone can make the difference between a fun or frustrating tournament. If course length is not appropriate for the middle third of the field, the fun factor can be greatly reduced.

WHAT FACTORS IMPACT COURSE DIFFICULTY?

After identifying who is playing and how far they hit the ball, you can start the process of determining how to set up the course. There are several

factors that impact difficulty and pace of play that must be addressed:

Overall Course Length — This has a major influence on how a course will play. The bottom line is that a longer course generally means more shots, more time, and less fun.

Rough Height and Mowing — Depending on golfer ability, rough height can be a major factor that determines the challenge and pace of play for a tournament. Tall rough may result in more lost balls and may also necessitate having spotters to help locate wayward shots. Such conditions may be appropriate for highly skilled golfers, but they will prove too difficult for many amateurs.

Many golf courses decide to raise the rough height during the week prior to hosting a tournament. Unless only

the very best golfers are playing in the tournament, this decision should be avoided. Raising the height of rough before a tournament, or not mowing it at all, will increase the difficulty for all golfers and slow pace of play. Keep the rough reasonable when there is a wide diversity of player ability.

Putting Green Surrounds

Mowing — The rough surrounding putting greens is often mistakenly treated the same as the rough adjacent to fairways, but these two areas are very different. Shots hit from the rough alongside fairways usually require a full swing, whereas shots from the rough surrounding putting greens require touch. Mowing the rough surrounding putting greens before a tournament can help reduce the difficulty for golfers that find themselves



Regardless of the resources available to prepare a course for tournament play, careful thought should be focused on presenting a challenge that is appropriate for the skill level of the field.



A shotgun start may seem chaotic before a tournament begins, but allowing all groups to finish at nearly the same time provides an opportunity to socialize and connect after a fun day of golf.

playing from these areas and will speed up pace of play. Avoid raising the height of rough around putting greens, as doing so will absolutely slow pace of play.

Bunkers — Both fairway and green-side bunkers can have a major impact on the extent to which a tournament is challenging and enjoyable. Bunkers need to be well-defined to avoid potential rules issues and should have the proper amount of sand to prevent thin or buried lies. For tournament play, fairway bunkers and bunker faces near putting greens should be firm. The “Aussie method” of raking — whereby bunker floors are raked while the faces are smoothed — is often used to minimize buried lies that can slow pace of play.

Putting Greens — Putting greens are where the trifecta of challenge, fun, and pace of play come together. There are multiple factors that need to be taken into consideration when preparing putting greens for any tournament, including the following:

Green Speed — Green speeds have increased significantly since they were first measured with the USGA Stimpmeter® in the late 1970s. The average green speed for tournament play in the 1970s was 8 feet 6 inches. Tournament green speeds today are much faster. Recent research investigating the [impact of putting green speed on pace of play](#) shows that pace of play gets slower as putting green speed is increased. Another important factor must always be considered when discussing putting green speed — hole location.

Hole Location — The article [“Putting Green Speeds, Slopes, and ‘Non-Conforming’ Hole Locations”](#) offers a guide for interpreting the relationship between green speeds and slopes around hole locations. As green speeds get faster, hole locations need to be in flatter areas. Although hole locations in steeply sloped areas of fast greens may be appropriate for professional golfers, such a setup is too difficult for many amateur golfers

and will likely contribute to a slow pace of play.

A perfect example of the effects created by a very difficult setup can be observed during a common event some courses host — U.S. Open Day. U.S. Open Day is an event that occurs at some golf facilities on the Saturday of the U.S. Open. The setup for the event usually features difficult hole locations and fast green speeds. When most amateur golfers face these conditions and play from the back tees, scores skyrocket. While fun for some, the setup often results in six-hour rounds simply because the conditions are too tough. The lessons learned from this type of setup can help guide decisions when organizing a tournament that is focused on having fun.

Putting Green Firmness — An often-overlooked aspect of course setup that impacts the challenge and enjoyment of the game is the firmness of putting surfaces. The ability to impart spin on a golf ball rewards skilled golfers when they hit approach

shots into firm putting greens. Those with less skill — i.e., those who do not hit the ball as solidly or as straight — often see their approach shots bound over firm putting greens. When putting greens are firm, high-handicap golfers often are forced to land their ball short of a putting green and play a bump-and-run shot. Unfortunately, two common situations make it very difficult for players to run their approach shots onto a putting surface. The approach to some putting greens is closed off by bunkers, requiring an elevated shot to a firm green. Other times, the approach is open but it is significantly softer than the putting green, making it difficult to successfully judge bump-and-run shots. When putting greens are firm, both situations will slow pace of play and reduce golfer enjoyment.

Putting Green Smoothness — Reducing or eliminating overhead irrigation on putting greens the day before a tournament and hand watering only those areas in need of water is the best way to deliver smoothness and consistency. Overhead irrigation may create wet areas that are overly soft and prone to developing uneven depressions from foot traffic throughout the day.

UNIQUE TYPES OF TOURNAMENTS

Many different formats can be used for tournament play. Individual stroke play is the most challenging and is decreasing in popularity. Other formats are ideal for pairing together players of all abilities and providing an opportunity for everyone to contribute to the success of a team. Examples range from the many variations of scrambles to four-ball events. There are many online resources available to learn more about unique and fun tournament formats.

As an organizer plans the format for a tournament, there are several key considerations to keep in mind:

Is the event intended to draw new players to the game? This is a key consideration for tournaments and events at every golf course as we move into the future. Pace of play and fun need to be emphasized to attract new golfers.

Does the organizer want the entire field to finish at the same time? If so, there is no question that a shotgun start is needed. Simultaneously starting groups on all tees in a shotgun format can be fun and allows all groups to finish at the same time and have the chance to rehash the day over a few beverages. However, it is crucial that the maintenance staff has time, labor, and equipment to prepare the golf course before play starts.



Tall rough significantly impacts course difficulty and pace of play. Choose a rough height that is appropriate for the middle third of the field.

What are the expectations for pace of play? Are resources available to meet these expectations? While national or state championships will have ample volunteers, local tournaments generally do not have the personnel to assist with pace of play issues. Having a course assistant on each nine goes a long way to improve pace of play and golfer enjoyment.

Should a maximum score be utilized? Stipulating a maximum score per hole will improve the pace of play regardless of the format. It also is especially helpful when the primary goal of an event is to have everyone finish at about the same time.

MANAGING THE TOURNAMENT

The following recommendations have proven effective at achieving the desired pace of play, regardless of the type of tournament:

Set up play from the appropriate tees. The tees for a tournament should be selected based on the swing speed of the players in the field, not on a basis of gender. In some cases, the forward tees are appropriate for everyone in the field, while in other cases a longer set of tees is appropriate.

Set tee-time intervals based on exit and cycle time information. Determining the cycle time for each hole is an important component of managing pace of play. This is described in the short video “[Why Traffic Jams Occur](#).” By knowing in advance how long it takes to play each hole, the tee time intervals for a tournament can be set no shorter than the longest cycle time to minimize backups.

There are many other ways to improve pace of play and the fun factor. Golf is always more enjoyable when the pace of play is reasonable. To assist in this regard, here are a few other ideas that have proven successful:

- Beverage carts should be stationary and should not move in the opposite direction of play.
- Course assistance personnel should focus on holes where backups commonly occur.
- Avoid making par-5 holes reachable in two shots.
- If the format involves the participation of a golf professional on a given hole, avoid having the golf professional hit shots for the group on a par-5. Use them on a par-3 hole, especially any par-3 that plays slow.
- If a slow par-3 is preceded by a par-4 with a short approach shot, lengthen the par-4 and shorten the par-3.
- Avoid stationing water coolers on slow holes.
- Allow carts to drive off cart paths on par-3 holes, if possible.
- Locate holes in the middle of putting greens as much as possible for scramble formats or similar team tournaments.



A high percentage of shots during a round of golf involve putting greens. Ensuring that speed, firmness, and hole locations are suitable for the field's skill level will enhance the golfer experience.

- Place hole locations in dry areas if wet weather is expected.
- Make sure there is appropriate signage to assist those playing the course for the first time.

GATHER GOLFER FEEDBACK

Survey golfers after a tournament, either through informal discussions or with a short written survey. Possible questions include:

- Did you have a good time? (1-5 scale)
- Did you like the format? (1-5 scale)
- How likely are you to play in this event again? (1-5 scale)

- Were you satisfied with the pace of play? (1-5 scale)
- How can we make the event better? (Written comments)

CONCLUSION

We all know golf is challenging, but what makes it fun? Some of the many answers include social interaction within a group, fresh air, exercise, the challenge to improve, shooting a good score, and simply watching well-struck shots fly toward the target. When decision-makers carefully consider course setup, tournament format, and golfer experience, they have the

opportunity to expose more golfers to another aspect of golf. Trying and testing different tournament formats for all skill levels is good for golfers and good for business. In the end, it is all about addressing the FUNdamentals of the game.

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