The Fun Factor

Understanding what makes golf fun will be good for your bottom line.

BY CHRIS HARTWIGER

Getting to know your best customers and how they play golf is the first step toward increasing their enjoyment.

Whether it is a junior-high girl sinking a putt to make her first par or a professional making a clutch putt on the 72nd hole to win the U.S. Open, the game of golf has an appeal and enjoyment that keep people interested for life. I call this the "fun factor." However, golf is difficult, and what should be an engaging challenge can become unduly difficult given certain course conditions. Golf course superintendents, professionals, course officials, and owners all play a pivotal role in the enjoyment of the game and therefore have a vested interest in keeping the game fun. Doing so will positively impact the bottom line for the golf facility.

So, is golf fun at your course? This depends on how the next three key questions are answered.

1. **Who is your best customer?**
2. **What makes golf fun at your facility?**
3. **What makes golf difficult at your facility?**

Once these questions have been examined, suggestions for evaluating your facility and improving the fun factor will be offered.

NOW ON THE FIRST TEE — YOUR BEST CUSTOMERS

After a couple of practice swings, your best customer addresses the ball and proceeds to hit a left-to-right shot that comes to rest in the rough 200 yards from the tee. He has three other best customers with him. One outdrives him and the other two come up short. Why

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Is the "fun factor" maximized at your golf course? Doing so will improve your bottom line.

Figure 1

The results of a Golf 20/20 survey in 2005 on what makes the game enjoyable for golfers. Underlined are factors influenced by those working at a golf course. When added together, they account for 60 percent of golfer enjoyment.

What makes golf enjoyable?

Course conditioning 19%
People they play with 19%
Course design 17%
Ball striking 12%
Score 8%
Weather 7%
Amenities 6%
Course aesthetics 6%
Exercise 4%
Competition 3%

are this foursome and many of the other foursomes that play the course on this day considered to be your best customers? They are your best customers because there are more of them . . . many more. In fact, the majority of golfers fall into this category. Below are additional information about your best customers and resources for further research.

Male golfers:

- Have an index between 7 and 16 (Men's USGA Handicap Statistics).
- The median handicap index is 14.5.
- Male golfers with a Course Handicap of approximately 20, or the typical male "bogey golfer," hit the ball an average of 200 yards off the tee, including carry and roll. The longest par-4 hole these golfers are able to reach in two is 370 yards (see Bogey Golfer).

Female golfers:

- 51% have handicap indexes between 16 and 31 (Women's USGA Handicap Statistics).
- The median handicap index is 27.
- Female golfers with a Course Handicap of approximately 24, considered a typical female "bogey golfer," hit the ball an average of 150 yards, including carry and roll. The longest par-4 hole they can reach consistently in two is 280 yards (see Bogey Golfer).

A brief review of the statistics above reveals that your best customers are not great golfers and don't hit the ball Herculean distances. Is your golf course set up and managed in a way to make the game fun for this group? To answer this question, we must first affirm what makes the game fun for them and what makes it difficult as well.

WHAT MAKES GOLF FUN?

In simple terms, the game of golf challenges a player to hit the golf ball from point A to point B in as few strokes as possible. But what makes this challenge enjoyable? A survey published by Golf 20/20 in 2005 was designed to identify what makes the game enjoyable. The results are presented in Figure 1. Underlined are factors influenced by those working at a golf course. When these factors are added together, it can be stated that 60 percent of the elements that make the game enjoyable are influenced by those working in the golf industry.

A quote from a Golf 20/20 paper published in 2005 is worth considering as well: "When asked to choose between playing golf on a very challenging, but sub-optimally maintained golf course or a less challenging, but immaculate facility, nine out of ten golfers would prefer playing on the less challenging courses in 'top-notch condition' . . . ."

In this question that linked conditioning and difficulty together, golfers overwhelmingly favor top-notch conditions on less difficult golf courses. When linked together with the survey results in Figure 1, an interesting conclusion is drawn. If changes to your course are desired and you would like to positively influence the outcome, make sure they favor improving conditioning and not making the course more difficult for your best customers, who we identified earlier.

WHAT MAKES GOLF DIFFICULT?

The elements of the game that make golf difficult are the final piece of the puzzle before recommendations can be made to improve the enjoyment of the game for your best customers. USGA Course Rating Resources provides excellent information that helps assess relative difficulty of

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certain elements of the golf course. Difficulty can be broken down into two primary categories: effective playing length and obstacles.

Effective Playing Length — This is a catch-all phrase that encompasses numerous factors (listed below) related to how long a given golf hole will play. The effective playing length is more than just the distance listed on a scorecard. Take the time to review these factors and how long each hole on your course plays.

- Slope
- Landing zone
- Roll
- Elevation change
- Dogleg / forced layup
- Prevailing wind
- Altitude

Obstacles — This is the second category that impacts the relative level of difficulty of a golf hole. As we learned, a 350-yard golf hole may effectively play longer or shorter, but the presence or absence of obstacles also impacts difficulty. Below are the obstacles that impact the difficulty of a golf hole.

- Topography — tilted lies
- Fairway width
- Green target
- Recoverability from rough

The effective playing length of a hole is often more than the yardage posted.

- Bunkers
- Out of bounds / deep rough
- Water hazards
- Trees
- Green surface slopes
- Psychological factors

ENHANCING THE FUN FACTOR AND IMPROVING YOUR BOTTOM LINE

After identifying who golf's best customers are and understanding why they enjoy the game and what makes the game difficult for them, those involved in the operation of a golf facility are equipped to reexamine their own golf course and implement changes to improve the "fun factor." When golfer enjoyment is maximized, more golf will be played and financial results will be more favorable.

The information presented thus far provides numerous opportunities to make your golf course more enjoyable for those who play it. To get this creative process started, three ideas are presented.

Grow Healthy Turf — This may seem like an obvious place to begin, but as shown earlier, golfers appreciate a well-conditioned golf course. In order to produce quality golfing conditions, healthy turfgrass is a must. As a result, every golf course should be in a program of continuing to improve on the building blocks for maintaining healthy turf. This begins with choosing the right grass for the location and extends to making sure all the basics are covered – sunlight, air movement, irrigation, drainage, nutrition, pest control, and cultural programs.

TEE IT FORWARD — This joint initiative between the PGA of America and the USGA encourages golfers to move up one or more sets of tees on golf courses they play. Guidelines for selecting tees based upon how far golfers hit the ball with a driver were developed and are presented in Figure 2.

Moving up a set of tees, or TEEING IT FORWARD, is an inexpensive way to enhance the enjoyment of the game for almost every golfer.

Figure 2

Guidelines for selecting tees based on average driver distance.

Driver Distance	Recommended 18-Hole Yardages
275	6,700 - 6,900
250	6,200 - 6,400
225	5,800 - 6,000
200	5,200 - 5,400
175	4,400 - 4,600
150	3,500 - 3,700
125	2,800 - 3,000
100	2,100 - 2,300

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Golfer response to the program in 2011 has been positive:

- 70% had more fun
- 47% played faster
- 91% will TEE IT FORWARD again in the future
- 52% are likely to play golf more often

Make Adjustments to Course Maintenance — Decision makers at a golf facility should review each of the factors related to course difficulty. This is an ideal way to identify areas that can be enhanced to increase enjoyment for your best customers. On USGA Turfgrass Advisory Service visits, I routinely observe areas that make the course unduly difficult for your best customers. These are listed below with a brief comment.

- Reasonable rough – The era of maintaining championship rough on a daily basis is over.
- Fair fairways – In parts of the country where bermudagrass is used, there is great flexibility in adjusting fairway widths. If your best customer is on the tee of a long par-4 and his average drive (200 yards with carry and roll) finds a landing area narrower than the average on shorter par-4 holes, adjust the fairway width or relocate the tee.
- Proportional difficulty – Designing and setting up a golf hole to be difficult is not hard to do. The art of design and course setup consists of creating a golf hole that will appropriately challenge low-handicap players yet allow the less-skilled golfer to navigate around the trouble and post a reasonable score. Evaluate each hole and determine if difficulty is proportional. Are there too many bunkers? Too many hazards? Is there a safe side of the fairway or the putting green for an average golfer to bail out? If not, see if changes can be implemented with tee placement, course setup, or even the removal of bunkers.
- Best green speed for your course and players – Identify the green speed that satisfies most of your customers most of the time and is agronomically achievable.
- Keep things dry – Dry fairways produce more ball roll and allow carts off the path more frequently.

Decision makers at the course have a tremendous influence on factors that make golf enjoyable.

The era of maintaining championship rough for daily play is over. Reasonable rough improves pace of play and enhances the "fun factor"!

CONCLUSION

The "fun factor" should be applicable not only to your best customers, but to those who manage the course and make decisions affecting the course. Take some time to identify and understand your best customers. Reconsider your course in light of those who play it most often. Make appropriate changes. The more your customers enjoy the game, the more golf they will play and the more likely they are to bring a family member or friend out to the course, too. Most important, your bottom line will improve. Now that's fun!

CHRIS HARTWIGER *enjoys having fun on golf courses in Birmingham, Alabama, with his wife and children as often as possible.*

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