

Slow Play

It's the curse of golfers, amateur and professional, and golf course owners everywhere.

by Gordon Grant

Slow play is a problem that's as old as the "grand old game" itself and one which has no simple or ready solution. Just hearing the words "slow play" conjures up bad memories.

Waiting to hit every shot because someone ahead is looking for a ball or taking forever to address the ball or marking score cards on the green or worse, just lolly-gagging about. To paraphrase Mark Twain, it's a good game spoiled.

Michael Scherloski of the Brooklea Golf and Country Club in Midland, Ont., says slow play affects every aspect of a golf course operation.

"It deprives our customers of that precious commodity-time," Scherloski said. "Moreover, it steals from our bottom line. It can be detrimental to pro shop sales, range revenue, food and beverage sales and ultimately, hard green fees and the image of our golf courses."

Scherloski, who attended a Georgian College symposium on slow play last year, says it's not just the golfers who are at fault. A good deal of the blame can be laid at the door of golf course operating policies.

From the owner's perspective it's more than just lost revenue from getting fewer players through in a day. There's also the fact that a course can gain a reputation for slow play that will discourage players from coming back. This is increasingly critical as golf meets competition for the leisure dollar from other less time-consuming activities.

"Contrary to what many of us would like to believe," Schlerloski said, "you do not have to golf to live. In the Midland, Ontario area, our biggest competition is not other golf courses but boating on beautiful Georgian Bay."

No one wants to turn what should be a leisurely, enjoyable experience into an Olympic sprint. But there are some measures courses can take to ensure that 18 holes doesn't take literally all day.

These include having a knowledgeable starter, good marshals, effective tee-time separation, keeping hazards relatively clean and installing "progress" clocks on several tees.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

The problem really starts with defining what slow play is.

Is it a round that takes more than four hours? Some owners think so, others don't.

What then is the ideal time that a round should take?

"It's when everyone who got through the course had an enjoyable 18 holes," is how **Gib Patterson** of Emerald Links in Greely, Ont., puts it.

"At a private club, like Rivermead (in Aylmer, Que.), you should play in four hours and 15 minutes," said **Jeff Baker**, the pro and one of the group that leases the nearby public Champlain Course, from the National Capital Commission.

"But on a public course like ours, where the calibre of player is different, it's going to take between four-and-a-half and five hours."

Dalton Hicks of Cardinal Golf Club, Kettleby, Ont., says that "if we have a mix of a tournament and people walking in off the street, we're pleased if we get them around in five hours."

John Bowen, the pro at the John Blumberg Golf Course in Winnipeg, says it takes about five hours to play a round there if the course is full.

This view is echoed by **Roy Ethier** of Emma Lake Golf Course in Saskatchewan, 30 miles north of Prince Albert who says "we're a tourist course and a four hour round isn't realistic."

"I don't think four hours is reasonable any more," said **Bob Martens** of the Dunes Golf and Winter Club in Grande Prairie, Alberta. "It was 15 years ago when there weren't as many golfers, but not today."

Patterson of Emerald Links doesn't like talking about how long it takes to get around or about speed, he talks about keeping pace.

"If people can play in three-and-a-half hours you make more money than if they play in four hours. That's a no-brainer.

"However, if you run out of people on the course what have you gained? We have to mix the new golfers who are slow with those who are experienced and fast.

"Some people say they took five hours to play when, in fact, it was 4 1/2 hours. When you're waiting, time seems to go slowly."

THE "USUAL SUSPECTS"

Almost everyone in the golf business thinks they know what causes slow play. The usual suspect is the player.

"A guy who's probably earning \$100,000 a year will hit a \$2 ball into the long grass and spend all day looking for the sucker," said Hicks.

"Looking too long for a ball is a major problem," agreed Ethier. "We're carved out of a forest."

"Some people park their golf cars in front of greens and mark their cards before they move and that stops people from hitting up, which slows things down," said Martens.

"Some people just move along slowly and don't see what's ahead of them," according to Trent Kaese of Cottonwood Golf Course in Nanaimo, B.C. "They get a little stubborn when we tell them sometimes, but they usually move along."

"In North America if you've got the money, you can play," said Patterson of Emerald Links. "So we allow people on the course who haven't played much.

Therefore, you need some compassion from those who know how to play, for those who don't."

There's no doubt, though, that those who are neophytes at the game slow things down.

I'VE SEEN THE ENEMY AND HE IS US

While there is general agreement that a lot of the time delay is caused by the behaviour of golfers, not enough attention is paid to aspects of golf course operation which might unwittingly lead to slower play.

A potential time consumer is the on-course beverage car. "They slow play down, perhaps by as much as half-an hour a round," said Bowen who suggested owners take a look at the way they are operated to see if they can do so without delaying play.

Course design and maintenance are also factors. A course with bunkers in front of greens or deep grass in and around hazards will cause players not to keep pace if they are high handicappers.

Restrictions on golf car operations also make the game longer. A 'car-path only' or "90 degree" rule will obviously delay play significantly.

START WITH A GOOD STARTER

Patterson and many others believe that getting golfers to keep pace begins with the starter.

At Emerald Links the starter takes a moment with each group teeing off to discuss keeping pace and how to avoid lagging behind.

"One thing we find most successful in moving people along is having a good starter," said Martens. "He or she puts the group at ease and prepares them for the kind of day they can expect."

At The Dunes the starter tells groups which tees to go off, provides information on the tough parts of the course and whether there's a tournament ahead of them.

On top of that, The Dunes reverse nines every month so there is need for a starter to make sure that people are coordinated.

Hicks at Cardinal, which has two 18's and an 18-hole executive course, plans to have a starter on each of the regular 18's next year.

He'll tell the groups whether they're on the right tee, to begin with," said Hicks. "He'll also tell them about the course and ask them to keep up.

"There's no doubt a good starter can help keep things moving."

TEE-OFF SEPARATION

One of the keys to dealing with slow play is the way in which the game starts on the first tee. Some courses start groups every seven minutes while others range all the way up to 12 minutes.

The implications of this are obvious, as Dalton Hicks points out: "if you're in the business of green fees, you lose 12 people an hour if you move from seven-minute tee times to 12 minutes."

And that's a lot of money spread over the season.

But some experts contend that having an extra cushion between groups will actually help.

Bill Yates of Los Angeles, President of Pace Manager Systems told the Georgian College symposium that the optimum spacing is 10 minutes.

Michael Scherloski, who was in the audience said Yates made a lot of sense on this issue.

"Before you go into shock over how much this will cost your course in lost revenue per day, ponder for a moment how much in revenue, customers and players have we all lost due to frustrated, angry and teed-off customers," he said. "How much has slow play cost us in other profit centres at our clubs?"

Golf course owners should resist the temptation to have each group tee off immediately after the group in front is out of range, he said, instead of waiting until the actual tee time has arrived. Holding golfers back will improve the pace of play.

If players are allowed to tee off as soon as the group in front of them have disappeared from range, the tee times will lack integrity. There will also be more of a tendency for players bunching up further out into the course and the marshals will not be able to evaluate unrelated problems or the actual problem players on the course.

Another element of starting is getting the players to the tee on time. Some have suggested that bookings should be made on the basis of an "on deck" time, perhaps 15 minutes before tee-off. If players fail to appear during their "on deck" period, they would forfeit their place.

In addition, line-ups at the tee should be avoided. Players should be called to the tee from another area such as the putting green.

SEND FOR THE MARSHAL!

Marshals, are another important ingredient in getting things to move smoothly on the golf course. But everyone agrees that if you don't have good ones you might as well not bother.

"If you have marshals who badger people, the word will get around and people will avoid your course," said Baker of Champlain. "We do the job ourselves."

He said the pro shop personnel "watch specific holes and we know whether a group has arrived about on time. If it hasn't, someone goes out and asks them to pick up their speed."

Mark Seabrook, of the Canadian Golf and Country Club at Ashton, Ont., says however, that while marshals are important, "when they speak to golfers, they're always told it's the group in front of them that's causing the problem."

Patterson believes marshals are invaluable. "A good marshal can determine who is keeping pace and who is not," he said. "When he determines who is not, he

talks to the people. He can ask them to pick up their ball and move up to the group ahead.

"If they can't keep up, we'll give them their money back, offer a rain check or let them play when there's more time."

He said however, that slow players almost always keep up after a warning.

"There have been cases where the pace was too slow for some players and they've left the course. We offer them a rain check; we don't expect people to pay for nothing."

Patterson said that at some courses in Britain "if someone's not back in the club house on time, they come out and get you."

"But that is in private clubs and they seldom have more than 100 people on the course."

Bowen at the Blumberg course says marshals shouldn't "do anything too bizarre to give players the idea they're on the clock."

"A good marshal should tell slow players to speed up and enjoy themselves as best they can."

At Cottonwood, Kaese says that as well as marshals, "workers on the course have the right to tell people to move along, if they see an open hole, or something."

At Emma Lake, where Ethier says they get lots of novice golfers because it's a tourist course, if someone is really lagging, we ask that players step aside and let a group play through."

The course has part-time marshals who are on only at busy times.

Martens, too, says marshals are valuable, especially in his market.

"At The Dunes people play in four-and-a-half hours on a consistent basis," he said. "Less is a bonus."

He said that generally speaking, people get defensive when a marshal stops to talk to them and "they think they've done something wrong."

So the idea is to get golfers to view a marshal as someone who is there to help.

"Our marshal carries a water jug and often stops just to make contact. Slow play is a delicate issue and if a marshal has to say something, it's better if he's already made friendly contact.

"We're not really able to tell people to pick up and move on because of the competition in the area. That and we don't want to appear snobbish. We want to come across as a user-friendly facility.

"Our marshal has to make sure people know they're not the only ones on the course and they haven't rented the course for the day. The fact is, if you interfere with the enjoyment of other groups, it has to be addressed. That's what a marshal does."

SOLUTIONS

Dalton Hicks of Cardinal Golf Club says, "every seminar I've been to over the years has had slow play on the agenda. It's a problem and I don't think anyone has yet come up with a solution."

Emerald Links' Gib Patterson believes that anything that helps people keep pace is good, including markers that show how far it is to the green and even having the tee-off time recorded on the bag tickets to tell accurately how long a round takes.

Keeping the rough short is a device used by Hicks at Cardinal to keep play moving.

"We keep the rough, where players hook or slice, at about two inches rather than, say, at six inches. That way a ball isn't too hard to find."

Baker said that at Champlain at the beginning of last season "we had contoured fairways" which look good.

That was changed to speed up play, and now the grass is cut at a uniform length in order to make balls easier to find for those who don't follow the flight too well.

Tricky pin placements can also contribute to a slow-down in play. Quick greens which lead to a lot of putting may also be a part of the problem.

PUNCHING THE CLOCK

At The Canadian Club at Ashton, outside of Ottawa, Mark Seabrook installed six clocks, the first on the first tee. Here's how that system works:

"We assume a round of four hours and 15 minutes," said Seabrook. The time on the clocks is staggered to reflect the ideal time for each leg.

"If your tee time is 10:50, then by the time you reach the first clock, it would read 10:50 if you are at a 'four hour, and 15' pace. It would be 10:45 if you're faster by 5 minutes and it would be 10:55 if you were slower."

Does it work? As part of an over-all plan, it does, said Seabrook.

"On average it has picked up the time you're on the course by half-an-hour. That's the average over a year."

He often hears golfers talk about getting a par and beating the clock, which means the system is not having an adverse effect on players.

Patterson at Emerald Links said mechanical devices on golf cars that give distances also help "and that's something we may consider in the future."

Computers on golf cars that provide distances are becoming more popular, but clearly marked yardages on sprinkler heads on the fairways and markers on the edges of fairways are far more common-and help to keep people moving.

Bill Yates says owners should establish a "Pace Rating" as a benchmark so that marshals will know what is slow and what is fast in terms of playing a hole. The pace rating is an objective measure made up of "Length" time, "Obstacle" time, "Green to Tee Distance" time and "Halfway House" time. If you have such an index for each hole it will be easier to determine where delays are occurring.

Golf courses should also work with players to see if they can modify part of the behaviour which leads to long rounds. They could establish clinics on player etiquette and encourage players to improve their short game by offering lessons at reasonable rates. Players could also be guided to tee decks which match their ability.

The National Golf Course Owners Association Canada produces a pamphlet called Keep Pace, A Solution To Slow Play, available to its member golf courses. The pamphlet contains a list of simple things golfers can do to maintain a reasonable pace and is distributed through pro shops.

Jeff Calderwood, NGCOA Executive Director, explains that "our research shows that a very significant part of the problem is lack of awareness among golfers. By reminding players of some very basic tips, most individual golfers can easily save 30 seconds per hole, which can total 20 or 30 minutes over 18 holes. Our Keep Pace pamphlet helps create and maintain that awareness."

So, the last word from the brochure:

"A round of golf should take no longer than four hours and 15 minutes to play. You may feel that this pace is too fast but, remember, slow play is not caused by long roughs, tricky greens or bad shots. Rather, slow play is the result of bad habits and bad habits can be corrected . . ."

Ten tips to avoid slow play

1. Have the starter discuss the course and its hazards with players. Have he or she remind golfers to be ready to hit their shots as soon as it is safe to do so.
2. Marshals are invaluable in helping players keep pace. A group should be asked to speed up if they begin to lag. If they drop farther behind, they should be asked to pick up and catch the group ahead. If they still fall behind, they should be asked to leave the course.
3. Indicate on the scorecard - or through a clock system the amount of time that should have elapsed between each hole.
4. Have distances to the green marked at 200, 150 and 100 yards, either by markers on the edge of the fairway or on sprinkler heads and the like.
5. Clearly indicate hazards, especially signage that makes it clear that playing from out of bounds is prohibited.
6. Keep the grass around water hazards clipped so those players don't have to thrash through deep vegetation to see whether their ball stayed out of the water.
7. Clear out heavy brush so that looking for a ball isn't like hiking through the jungle.
8. Restrict the time golfers spend looking for lost balls.
9. Ensure that golfers get off the green when they've putted out. They should mark their cards after they clear the green.
10. Move tee blocks up on days when the course is likely to be full.

We send groups off every nine minutes instead of seven. That provides better spacing. Our marshals are then in a better position to identify slow groups and they are empowered to tell people to get moving.

Trent Kaese, Cottonwood Golf Course, Nanaimo, B.C.

Our tournaments are shot-gun start, modified scrambles. In this format the person whose drive has been used can't hit the second shot, and so on. That saves us 22 minutes a round, on average.

Doug Mahovlic, Olympic View Golf Club, Victoria, B.C.