

# Time Is Money!

## MANAGING THE CHALLENGES OF PACE OF PLAY

### THE PACE OF PLAY ISSUE

*"I have been waiting for this moment all day, looking forward to leaving the office behind and heading to the course for a perfect evening round of golf with a 4:10 starting time. What's this? The starting times are running behind? I haven't even started playing yet and now I'm wondering if I'll be able to finish my round before dark. Finally, at 4:30 I hit my drive flush and down the middle and my good mood returns. After holing my putt for birdie on the par 5 first hole, I walk happily down the path through the trees to the par 3 second hole and find... two groups waiting on the tee, and the group ahead of them just walking off the tee. I say good-bye to the great round I was looking forward to. Yet the evening is spectacular and I'm one under par, so why do I feel so let down?"*

The answer is simple. Our golfer is disappointed because his expectations were shattered by what we typically call "slow play." This common problem causes more frustration and anger than three-putting from six feet. At least a three-putt green might be overcome on the next hole, but with slow play our friend will be stuck in a traffic jam until the sunset. Surveys have shown that golfers rank pace of play among the very top features they look for when choosing a course to play. The truth is that pace of play doesn't have to be an issue at your facility. Many courses have successfully managed to meet the high expectations of their players, round after round, and these are the courses that are thriving.



Lost balls have an impact on pace of play.

**THE SECRET TO QUALITY**

Course management teams today are beginning to see slow play as a quality problem. Courses that deliver smooth flowing rounds of golf for their early morning groups see their play dropping off during later morning starting times because those times produce lower quality, slow play experiences. Golfers fight for earlier times for one reason: they know they will get a higher quality product for their money.

Doesn't it stand to reason that a course offering consistently high quality, free flowing rounds of golf at any starting time throughout the day will fill more starting times? Won't their revenue increase? Won't course managers have fewer complaints to deal with? Of course. When the pace of play is improved and becomes consistent for every player, we all win. I often say, "When you manage the pace of play, you manage the quality of golf."<sup>TM</sup>

Golf course operators have worked for decades to find solutions for their pace of play problems. It isn't easy and the solutions aren't the same at every course. In my years of observation and study of pace of play, I learned that one

reason it's such a tough nut is that we're guided by two myths that point us in the wrong direction.

**Myth 1**

**A Round of Golf Should Take 4 Hours.**

Ask just about any golfer on any course to define slow play and you'll hear, "anything over 4 hours!" This is a subjective response and one that is not true for many North American courses. The 4-hour standard probably came from the Old Course at St Andrews, which was also the source for making 18 holes the standard for a round of golf. But before any course embarks on a pace improvement program, it is essential to be able to define what slow play is on that course. The Pace Rating System developed by the USGA®, and embraced by the Golf Association of Ontario (GAO) for the past 4 years, uses a combination formula from the course ratings issued that include: length, obstacles (difficulty), and green to tee distances. The System provides objective data about the "time it should take" to play when the course is full, based on the course's playing length, severity of obstacles, green to tee distances, and cart policies.

So in fact there is no one definition for slow play. It's the course design and routing that determines the time it should take to play, and since no two courses are the same, that time will certainly not be a universal 4 hours. The myth that all rounds should take 4 hours is one of the biggest obstacles in addressing slow play. It sets everyone's expectations too high and hides the real causes of slow play.

**Myth 2**

**Players are the Major Cause of Slow Play.**

Now, if the actual time to play your course when it is full takes longer than your Pace Rating, it is time to analyze what's causing the difference. Most owners and managers automatically point the finger at players but believe it or not, players are not the biggest reason for slow play on our courses, any more than slow drivers are the reason for gridlocked freeways.

One of the biggest culprits is overcrowded courses, not players playing too slowly. This is a management problem having to do with how the course is loaded. If a course puts too many players in too little space, all the beating on players in the world won't make traffic move any faster. Before you argue for the bottom line, let me assure you that every course I have worked with to reduce crowding has improved its bottom line as a result. And here's something else: Players who really are playing too slowly are actually hidden on overcrowded courses. However, when traffic throughout the course is moving along smoothly, the slow groups are easy to spot and some tips from the Marshal or a GPS system will help them pick up the pace before things get out of hand.

When an effective pace improvement program is implemented, a balance is achieved between management's responsibilities and players' responsibilities, and real progress can be made. Starters are taught how to properly load the course to avoid overcrowding, and to



Backlog of golfers waiting to tee off at the 5th hole.

maximize the flow of play, the player's experience, and the bottom line. This is an all-around win.

The causes of slow play are complex and unique to each course, but once

these two myths are dispelled, the root causes of slow play on your course can be seen, understood and addressed. Then solutions can be achieved, as we've done at courses around the world.

**NEW TOOLS**

In my experience working with courses to improve their pace and flow of play, I have recognized two key elements that are critical to success: 1) changing the way operators think about the problem of slow play, and 2) new tools to use to diagnose and manage the pace of play on a day-to-day basis.

In this section we'll talk about tools. Mentioned earlier, the USGA Pace Rating System developed in 1994 uses formulae to determine the time it "should take" four players on a full course to play eighteen holes. The course Pace Rating and individual hole "Time Pars" calculate by analyzing a variety of features, with different formulae when carts have access to the fairway and when carts are restricted to cart paths. This objective measurement tool and its consistent, firm data make it easier to diagnose the root causes of slow play and monitor the position of golfers, and harder for anyone to argue with. The GAO has provided an example using Borden Golf Club, in Borden, ON:

**Pace Rating for Borden Golf Club**

*Issued by Golf Association of Ontario*

**Men's – Circlod Pines – White Tees**

Hole	Time Par (minutes)	Hole	Time Par (minutes)
1	14	10	13
2	13	11	8
3	9	12	16
4	17	13	14
5	14	14	13
6	16	15	15
7	9	16	16
8	13	17	9
9	13	18	15
<b>Front Nine</b>	<b>1:58</b>	<b>Back Nine</b>	<b>1:59</b>
<b>PACE RATING TOTAL TIME</b>			
<b>3 Hours 57 Minutes</b>			

# Pace of Play

(provided by the Golf Association of Ontario / GAO)

Once the Time Par for each of the holes at the facility is determined (using the main tee played at the facility) then the total Pace Rating time can be calculated. At this point, a decision can be made about which interval makes the best option (weighing the financial impact for the operator compared to the experience for the golfer). For instance: If the overall Pace Rating at your course is 4 hours and 3 minutes; then the Pace of Play Chart indicates that using:

- 10 minute interval, there would be 59 available tee times between 7:30am and 5:10pm
- 9 minute interval, there would be 65 available tee times between 7:30am and 5:06pm
- 8 and 9 minute interval combination, there would be 69 available tee times between 7:30am and 5:08pm

Bill Yates explains in the article that having more available tee times doesn't necessarily translate to more course utilization and more revenue. The wrong starting interval inevitably leads to SLOW PLAY, underutilization, discounted rounds, refunds, angry players, and a negative impact on the bottom line.

Another tool is a structured system to identify and categorize causes of slow play. A major contribution of Pace Manager Systems® is the development of the "Five Key Factors that Impact the Pace of Play."™ Every day on a golf course dozens of factors are interfering with the pace and flow of play, making the "should take" and "does take" times very different. By distilling these factors down into five categories and using the course Pace Rating as an objective diagnostic tool, the effect of these factors can now be quantified and more easily managed.

## FIVE KEY FACTORS

The five key factors that affect pace of play are the following:

### 1. Management Policies and Practices

Of all the Five Factors, the first, Management Practices and Policies, has the biggest impact on pace of play. These are the daily activities of the golf course management and staff, and this is where I focus first in working with a course.

Key to success is the willingness of the management team to change their thinking by looking at the problem from a different perspective. If we find that some of the current management practices are negatively impacting the pace of play, those practices will need to change. I typically find that the most successful managers don't fear change; they embrace the challenge of implementing change. They are taking ownership of managing the quality on their course.

On a day-to-day basis, the two most important variables management needs to deal with are properly loading the course, and monitoring play on the course. Successful managers have gathered back their control of these key operational variables by looking at what they do each day and making strategic changes. In this way, they can establish and maintain a consistent, high quality playing experience throughout the day, and they will ensure thereby that it is the management of the course, rather than the players, that determines the quality of the playing experience.

### 2. Player Behaviour

Player Behaviour is also strongly influenced by management and is controlled through proper Marshal training and providing Marshals with monitoring tools such as the pace of play matrix or real time GPS data on the times and locations of groups. Also critical is management communication to the players regarding directions through the course, and expectations by providing pace of play feedback to players.

### 3. Player Ability

It is important to help your players select the correct tees to play from. This will keep them from taking on a challenge they can't possibly overcome and will give them a more enjoyable day at the course.

### 4. Course Setup and Maintenance Practices

Because this has a major impact on the pace of play, I advise courses to carefully manage and maintain extreme rough, especially when it is in the areas most played by the average players. The average golfers hit their best shots from 160 to 200 yards, so Course Superintendents should set the tee markers to bring the fairway, not major hazards, into play on all holes.

### 5. Course Design

The flow of holes and the sequence of pars will determine how smoothly the course will play. Courses with unusual routings and/or severe terrain need special attention when managing the daily operations of the course. For example a par 5 followed by a par 3 will almost always create a backup at the par 3 tee.

When staff members are taught to focus on these key factors, problem identification and subsequent improvement recommendations come quickly.

## BEST PRACTICES

Reviewing a list of best practices is like looking at a medicine shelf in a pharmacy. Treating without a diagnosis is risky, as causes of slow play vary so widely; however

there are a few key pace of play best practices that will be helpful to any course.

- Adopt a management philosophy that focuses on quality and continuous improvement.
- Structure your day-to-day policies and procedures to support your new philosophy.
- Encourage your professional staff to get out of their offices and get out on the course.
- Determine the optimal starting interval for each course, so as not to overcrowd the course or underutilize it.
- Start each group on its starting time.
- Know how long it "should take" to play each hole and know the Pace Rating(s) for each course.
- Hire and train good Marshals or Rangers who are customer service focused, and give them the tools and support they need to be successful.
- Communicate with your customers and members and let them know how you are helping them to play a smooth round of golf.
- Let your customers and members know how they can help you provide a smooth playing round of golf. For example when they make their reservations and when they check-in at the Pro Shop, tell them "their starting time is the time their first ball is in the air."
- Help players decide which set of tees is the best for their game. They'll enjoy the game more.
- Work with your Superintendent to look carefully at areas of extreme rough, particularly on the inside of doglegs, in landing areas that are blind from the tee, and generally in areas bordering the fairway that are 160 to 200 yards from the most frequently used tees. Keeping extreme rough out of these areas will help keep play moving.

## ACHIEVING SUCCESS

Among the many successful operators I have worked with, the following are three who demonstrate how improving their pace of play system yielded great results

for their facility. These three managers each committed their personal time and their staff's time to design, test and implement brand new strategies in order to make the golf experience for their guests and members the absolute best it could be. In every case the personal involvement and changed thinking of the manager helped jumpstart a successful outcome. Alan Carter, Director of Golf at the Fairmont Jasper Lodge Golf Club, in Jasper, AB said, "We moved our tee time intervals from 8 to 10 minutes. The key is that the starter must hold them to starting at 10 minute intervals."

"In the initial stages of using Bill's pace of play system we saw an increase in rounds played of 3% or 4%. Although it is difficult to state the exact impact on the bottom line, I would estimate it's about \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year."

Rod Cochrane, General Manager of Predator Ridge Golf Resort in Vernon, BC echoes Carter's experience. "The Pace Manager Systems addressed our biggest complaint, which was slow play. It has allowed us to set customer's (and especially our member's) expectations to reasonable levels. The tools and data that the Pace Manager Systems provided to us have confirmed what we were doing right and have educated us in what we were doing wrong as well. In short, I believe that this could and should become the standard at golf courses throughout North America," states Cochrane.

Lisa Lanctot, Business Development Coordinator from the City of Calgary Golf Courses in Calgary, AB stated that "Setting reasonable pace of play expectations is the first step and it must take into account the uniqueness of each facility. The standard industry expectation for a 4-hour round isn't necessarily do-able at your course. We have three 18-hole courses each with a completely different pace of play. To do it right you need to factor in more than just the layout of your course. You need to consider the distances from green to tee, hazards and trees halfway house stops, course set up and maintenance practices."



Golfers waiting to tee off on 1st hole due to slow pace of play.

"I distinctly remember at one of our 9-hole courses weekend rounds averaged 2.5 hours at 8am and close to 3 hours by noon. At one hole it wasn't uncommon to have backups of 3 or 4 groups. We implemented a number of Bill's pace of play concepts and changed the tee time interval to 9 minutes. The average weekend round is now less than 2.5 hours all day long. Pace of play complaints are virtually non-existent. It is all about improving the customer experience."

#### SOLVING THE ISSUE

Yes, slow play is still an issue on many courses, and the major golf associations are paying attention, recognizing that slow play is an impediment to the growth of the game. I was asked by the PGA of America to be the Project Director for a Pace of Play Study that was the starting point for a major industry-driven assault on slow play. The PGA wanted to "increase awareness and implementation of pace of play best practices, to improve facility utilization, grow golf participation and enhance customer satisfaction." The findings and analysis of the study are available at [www.pacemanager.com](http://www.pacemanager.com) and the three major themes from the findings are summarized below.

**Theme 1: The pace of play can be improved:** Our study found that across the board, professionals at the courses surveyed believe that there are solutions

to the slow play problem, as we were able to demonstrate for their courses. Course managers agree that a good pace of play is what will get players to the course and it is what will create the overall best experience. They also agree that a slow play reputation is damaging to courses and to the game.

**Theme 2: There is no one silver bullet:** Solving the problem of slow play can't be done with one simple response. The managers surveyed in the study learned that pace of play is a complex problem involving many variables. The findings and the observed best practices clearly demonstrated that every course is unique and that a solution that works for one course might not work for another. For managers looking for a quick fix, this is bad news. But for those committed to real and lasting improvement, success is possible.

**Theme 3: Any successful solution needs to have participation from the entire management team:** A number of the courses involved in the study demonstrated strong hands-on involvement from senior management or ownership, which greatly facilitated their success. Because recommended changes typically involve adjustments to basic day-to-day operations, the successful pace of play improvement program must involve all staff personnel and needs the full support of the executive management team to encourage and adopt the recommended improvements.

#### THE NEXT STEPS

As a golf course owner or manager, you have a product to sell to your customers. Your product is a golfing experience that lets players know they have received value for the price they have paid. There is an inarguably high correlation between a player's perception of value and his or her pace of play during the round. A player's memory of waiting before playing every shot will ruin the playing experience; it cheapens the "product" and destroys the player's perception of value.

When a course implements a successful pace improvement program, the product not only meets but usually exceeds the expectations of the players. For our golfing friend whose after-work round was ruined, this will give him the enjoyable evening of golf he was looking for. In the customer's mind the quality and value of the playing experience will soar, giving you the kind of reputation every course wants. You will receive loyalty and revenue when you can tell your customers with confidence that every available starting time at your course will provide their foursome with the same consistent, high quality experience. It doesn't get any better than that.



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