

The Anatomy of a Four-Hour Round

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By John Garrity



Everyone who cares about golf, and benefits from it, has a role in improving pace of play (Illustration by Peter Arkle)

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he golf course is my happy place, so I don't see five hours of fresh air and frivolity as a bad thing. But **T** four minutes of wait time on a par 3 has me shooting daggers at the idlers up on the green – the 20-handicapper practicing his chipping stroke, the woman using a green-reading method to line up a 3-foot putt, the guy in the yellow cap talking on his cell phone. “While we're young,” I mutter, echoing a 2013 USGA campaign to get golfers off the shoulder and into the travel lane.

But what if my 20-handicapper, having missed his bogey putt, promptly picks up? What if that woman efficiently holes her 3-footer and walks briskly toward the next tee? What if the guy in the yellow cap is already behind the wheel of his cart? Who's to blame for my five-hour round? Who stole my hour of joy?

Answering that question has been a USGA focus for nearly a decade. “While We're Young” featured 30-second PSA spots by the likes of Arnold Palmer, Tiger Woods and Annika Sorenstam, who drove home the point that individual behavior – cutting down on practice swings, clearing greens efficiently, playing from the appropriate tees – could speed up the game. It was an “Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires”-style campaign, and if Smokey Bear has a TV, he learned that he shouldn't fill out his scorecard while standing on the green.

But golfers are hardly the sole cause for five- and six-hour rounds. Just as culpable are punitive course designs, testing setups, and unsophisticated management practices. “Traditionally, facility managers looked at the golfers as the problem,” said Matt Pringle, Ph.D., managing director of the USGA Green Section. “But we've learned that the facilities themselves often have to change their policies and operations.”

Example: Pinehurst Resort's Course No. 4, a highly regarded 2018 Gil Hanse redesign of a Donald Ross original, experienced backups on its second hole, a short par 5. “We simply pushed all the tees back to make sure the green was not reachable in two,” said Matt Barksdale, the resort's head pro. “That improved the flow.”

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Flow. Barksdale is quick to point out, is more important than a round's duration. "If a round of golf takes five hours and you never have to wait, that's fine. But if it's four hours and you're waiting on every shot..." Not good.

"Courses have more control over pace of play than they think," said Eric Brey, Ph. D., director at GGA Partners and a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, which partners with the USGA on golfer experience research. "They just have to change their mindset." To that end, he debunks certain stereotypes, such as the perception that women are slower players: "That's not actually the case. Men playing from the tips are a bigger problem." Similarly, walking golfers are often faster than those sharing carts. "The ranger emerges as a more and more important person, and they are not always trained the best," Brey said. "And the starter! The starter *must* send groups off on time. If you start five minutes late, you're already annoyed."

A favorite pace-of-play laboratory for Brey and Kris Schoonover, Ph. D., is Wisconsin's Erin Hills, a U.S. Open (2017) and U.S. Amateur (2011) venue that will also host the 2022 U.S. Mid-Amateur and 2025 U.S. Women's Open. Erin Hills is a 7-mile walk – no carts – and on average takes 4 hours, 50 minutes to play. But they don't want you looking at your watch.

"We work really hard on suspending disbelief and maintaining the 'wow factor,'" said Schoonover, a UW-Stout professor who wears two hats at Erin Hills as director of operations and assistant competition director. Wait times, at any stage of the golfer's visit, are among the "perfect frustraters" that Schoonover targets. "We want time to kind of stop. We want groups to say, 'Holy mackerel, that was 4 hours and 50 minutes?'"

To that end, an Erin Hills starter questions golfers on the first tee – *Played here before? Who's your caddie? What's your handicap?* – and points individuals to the appropriate tee. A ranger then watches your group play the first two or three holes, looking for problems. ("You hire rangers, but they can't

just sit there,” Schoonover explained. “You have to train them how to move a slow group.”) Another touchpoint is “length of wait at the turn.” That becomes a problem when, in Brey’s words, “one group stops for a couple of beers and a burger that takes time to grill.” Schoonover addressed that issue at Erin Hills in direct and brutal fashion: “We took away the chairs at the halfway house and our pace of play got a minute quicker.”

A minute doesn’t sound like much, but researchers have looked at dozens of variables affecting pace of play, and the minutes add up. **Fast greens, deep rough, penalty areas, bunkers and out-of-bounds are clear impediments to brisk play.** They are also essential features of championship courses. Long par 3s cause backups, and so do the drivable par 4s championed by golf architects and long hitters.

In recent years, the proliferation of research, data and technology has been one of the major developments in improving pace of play. For decades, the information we had about pace was what we saw happening with the group in front of us. That is probably why previous efforts to improve pace focused solely on changing the behavior of golfers. But now, with GPS data available through carts, smartphones and devices used by the USGA and others, facility managers have insights into what really causes backups and delays that add minutes to a round.

“We can see where everybody is on the golf course, so we know who’s ahead of pace or behind,” said Sean Chalk, head pro at Milburn Country Club in Overland Park, Kan. Chalk and Milburn’s director of golf, Luke Smith, share their data with the club’s members, who are encouraged to engage about course setup and maintenance.

“We’ve adjusted some pin positions,” Chalk said, citing a front hole location on the par-3 fifth, where short chips often rolled back to the golfer’s feet. Tellingly, the data hasn’t identified any chronically slow players – just a problematic stretch of holes on the front nine where a drivable par 4 and a 225-yard par 3 precede a tree-lined par 5 with a hard-to-hit fairway. Said Chalk, “It’s just a tough golf hole, a blind tee shot up the hill.”

Milburn, a PGA Tour venue in the 1950s and a finalist to host the 1953 U.S. Open, logs 250 to 280 rounds per day on weekends with an average round time of 3:57. But as the USGA’s Pringle emphasizes, gap time is a better measure of pace. “You’re a foursome, for example, and you’ve got 150 yards in on a par 4. You can’t go until the group in front of you clears the green. Now you hit your approach shots, you do your chipping around the green, you putt out, and off you go. Let’s say you’re efficient and it takes you nine minutes to finish after the group in front of you. That’s gap time. But if, through no fault of your own, they sent you off at eight-minute intervals, your round time just got one minute longer than the group in front of you. And after 40 or 50 groups, that accumulates to 40 or 50 minutes of waiting time.”

Pringle’s hypothesis – which he calls “math” – is borne out by USGA data collected at another former tour venue, Rancho Park Golf Course in Los Angeles. A 100,000-round-per-year municipal track, Rancho Park logged early-morning rounds in the 3½-to-4-hour range. By late afternoon, however,

grumpy golfers were clocking out after 5½-to-6 hours of “play.” Two of those hours were spent picking at teeth and staring at clouds.

It wasn't the golfers' fault. Trying to meet demand at a muni where customers slept in their cars before dawn, Rancho Park sent groups off at six-minute intervals. “That was the published tee time,” Pringle clarified, “but they were not able to adhere to that.” Indeed, Rancho golfers knew that their 10:30 foursome probably wouldn't be wheels-up until 11:00 or later. “It's really the responsibility of the course to make sure they're not putting golfers onto the course faster than the flow will allow. Otherwise, you're setting the whole day up for disaster.”

Utilizing pace-of-play data collected by USGA interns, Rancho Park switched to eight-minute intervals. That eliminated the first-tee logjam, and golfers no longer had to factor a pre-round wait into their day, making their experience more predictable, although round times did continue to climb as the day went on. Which brings us back to on-course data collection – or, as the Brits put it, “Mind the gap.”

“What is the capacity of the course?” Pringle said. “What is a reasonable gap between groups? In some cases, eight minutes is fine. In some cases, 10 minutes is fine. It all depends on the layout and where you're placing tees versus hole location.”

Based on tracker data gathered at dozens of American courses, the USGA has determined that, for the average male driving his ball 200 yards – sorry guys, the data doesn't lie – “the slowest holes are the ones with the longest approach shots, especially long par 3s and reachable par 5s.”

In all of those cases, the delay is caused by the player's need to wait for the green to clear before launching a shot that will often fall short, but it raises questions. The USGA wants golfers to play from handicap-appropriate tees – à la the USGA/PGA of America “Tee it Forward” initiative of 2011 – but USGA data suggests that *lengthening* certain holes shortens wait times. Moving up shortens round times and makes the game more fun; moving back, by forcing players to lay up, eliminates waits but makes scoring more difficult.

Besides, many golfers make it clear that four-hour rounds are not their priority – not if slow-play remediation undermines the very qualities that make championship layouts attractive. Nobody wants to “fix” the Road Hole on the Old Course at St. Andrews. Nobody wants to shave Oakmont's rough and fill in its Church Pews bunker. Nobody wants to drain the water surrounding TPC Sawgrass's island-green 17th – well, let's say most people don't.

“We do *not* want to dictate the character of a golf course,” Pringle said, emphasis on not. “If the character of your course is challenge and difficulty, that's absolutely your prerogative. If you have a photo-op signature hole, that's also your prerogative. You just need to balance your tee-time intervals so they're consistent with how quickly golfers can flow.”

There's that word again: *flow*. "If you have a smooth flow of play, a 4½-hour round doesn't feel like a long round," said Hunki Yun, director of business development for the USGA Green Section. "But if you play in 4 hours and 15 minutes, and you have one or two significant waits, you remember that as a negative experience." As for who's most responsible for slow play, based on the data, Pinehurst's Barksdale answered with a shrug. "I believe it's a mixed bag - 60 percent the facility, 40 percent the user. The facility has to set the golfer up for success with proper intervals and a reasonable course setup, but the golfer should use the right tees and see that his group stays in position."

There's one answer to the conundrum, based on research, expertise and shared knowledge across the golf industry.

John Garrity is a former Sports Illustrated writer who spent 38 years at the magazine, and has also authored numerous books.

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