

Abandon Par

What is good for?

It's been in the news that one of my newest projects, at Sand Valley in Wisconsin, will be a par-68 golf course. I've had a lot of questions about why I would do that. I'm trying to make a point, that I don't care what par is. And neither should you.

Today's golf professionals don't care about par, either. Maybe thirty or forty years ago, par was a good score for them, but at most Tour stops today if they go out and shoot par the first two days, they'll be lucky to make the cut. *(A PGA Tour pro at even par for every round would have missed the cut in 21 of the 33 tournaments that had cuts in the 2018–19 season through the Open Championship. —Ed.)*

Old Man Par is not really that old. The game was played in the U.K. for hundreds of years before the term came into being, and then it was almost entirely in the U.S., where an early 20th century version of the *Rules of Golf* listed the correct par for given yardages (par 3: 0-250; par 4, 251-450; par 5, 451+). Par became the standard of great golf in the 1930s; before that, winning scores for a four-day stroke play tournament were not far off 300, and nobody really expected to shoot 72.

If you go back to read a U.K. golf magazine from 100 years ago, you will encounter a cartoonish figure named Colonel Bogey. Bogey was the sort of golfer who beats you in handicap tournaments – a clever older golfer who can't hit it much more than 200 yards, but who never takes risks beyond his ability, and beats you with a clever short game.

He came into being as a form of competition. The game is match play, but instead of a living, breathing opponent, each player compares his scores to the pre-set performance of a ghost antagonist, or a "bogey man" in the words of a popular song (think "boogeyman"). Whoever won the most holes against this specter won the competition. The ghost picked up a military rank along the way, and it was suggested that so relentless an adversary must surely be an officer. The idea was so widespread that many clubs listed their "bogey scores" on the scorecard. Even in 1982, when I visited Swinley Forest Golf Club outside London for the first time, Bogey was on the card there, not par. (The club still happily exists in a time warp.) The bogey score for Swinley Forest was 74, distracting one from the fact that the whole course "from the tips" was 6001 yards, and strict par would have been 67 or 68.

> To play our best, we should **set our own goals** according to our skills, no matter what par is.

Most of the world's golfers would be much happier with Colonel Bogey in their sights than with Old Man Par. He was a bit more forgiving, and golf course architects then were more likely to have him in mind instead of trying to build a course where only scratch players and pros could hope to shoot par.

Today, we may be coming full circle on the topic. There's no such thing as a par-five on the Tour, really: At this year's U.S. Open the 9th hole played 533 yards on Saturday and the USGA called it a par-4 – and should have, considering Brooks Koepka hit 9-iron for his second shot.

It's silly to argue about whether such a hole should be a par-4 or par-5; par today only exists on Tour to let scoreboards compare players who are at different points in their rounds. On any hole under 620 yards, Koepka and his running mates are trying to make 4, even if the card says it's a par-5 and it would likely have been a Bogey 6. They set their target score according to their own high standards. The guys who can't bomb it must sink or swim by hitting wedge shots close enough to birdie the par-5s consistently.

You and I are not nearly that good, but we too should set our goals according to our skills. It doesn't matter what par is – golfers who want to play their best should set their own target scores for each hole to try and break 80 or 90 or whatever their realistic goals are. Score a five on every hole and you'll shoot 90; an even mix of fours and fives gives you 81, and level fours are 72.

So why worry about par? The most interesting holes are the in-between holes – the ones where we have a chance to beat Colonel Bogey's standard or even Old Man Par's, and the low-handicapper may get upset if he doesn't. Some of the most exciting holes on Tour are short par-4s like the 10th at Riviera (311 yards) and short 5s like the 13th at Augusta (485 yards), which sound like pushovers but seldom play that way.

Wouldn't a course full of holes like that be terrific? ■