

Consulting Report Part IV: Tees and Q's

Varying the starting points wisely can revitalize a golf course without huge new expenditures.

Moving tees around is not just something the maintenance crew does each morning. Green committees do it, too, constantly shifting the tees around—and generally back a few yards—to try to "maintain the challenge" of their courses. It's so easy to do that they often proceed without the advice of an architect.

As long as you're not too close to a boundary fence or to another hole, changing tee locations isn't dangerous, but sometimes it can have more impact on the playability of a hole than intended. Often, there isn't room to move the tees further back on the same angle, and changing the angle just to add length can result in good drives going through the fairway into trouble. If you're not careful, you may even bring other holes into play; Lon Hinkle achieved fame for playing down the wrong fairway after the USGA lengthened a hole at Inverness so much it presented an obvious shortcut. At the U.S. Open that was merely embarrassing, but at most clubs such a mistake puts members in harm's way.

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Before we tackle issues of tee placement, let me first address aesthetics. To start, I'm an outlier in thinking clubs waste a lot of money grooming their tees to such a high standard, considering everyone plays the ball off a peg. But management companies will tell you that golfers judge the condition of a course by the greens and tees.

Many clubs in the Met Area mow their tees as rectangles with square corners because it's "traditional," but when those courses were young their superintendents were not so meticulous about the shapes. Some architects abhorred formal shapes in the natural landscape; you can include me in that camp.

Often, at clubs where we consult, I'm asked if an architect might have deliberately misaligned a tee to fool golfers into driving off-line. I don't know of any architect in history who endorsed such a cheap trick; it's likely the alignment just got off-kilter through years of mowing changes. However, the assumption that tees are supposed to be perfectly aligned is not necessarily true; sometimes, on a cross-slope, you have to build an oddly aligned tee in order to get enough surface. And in the end, isn't it the golfer's responsibility to align himself?

There are also differences of opinion among architects, contractors, and superintendents about whether tees should be constructed flat. On older courses, tees were always tilted to one side or to the front or rear to ensure good surface drainage. (If you've ever wondered why you're more likely to top the ball off an elevated tee, it's because the tee probably tilts to the front.) Today a lot of tees are built out of a sand mix so it's possible to make them truly flat, but I prefer to leave a bit of tilt in them: the surface drainage helps to reduce the potential for disease. A few architects have experimented with contoured tees that allow a player to choose a spot to help promote a draw or fade, or force him to adjust, but the idea has yet to be accepted as mainstream.

I'm a huge fan of providing alternate tees that

give holes a different look from one day to another, especially where there aren't rows of trees so the tees can be set on a different angle to the fairway. But nine times out of ten, the clubs' interest in new tees is about changing the playing length of the course by adding back or forward tees. My rules about building new tees on old courses include the following:

1. **The most important thing is not finding the perfect yardage, but having sufficient tee space.** I've rarely seen a course where the par-3 holes didn't need more tee space to spread out the wear and tear. But that doesn't mean your par-3s need to be longer.

2. **Ten yards makes zero difference.** The green chairman or the club pro may feel otherwise, because those particular ten yards are crucial to whether he can carry a bunker on a particular hole; but every member hits the ball a different distance, so what's perfect for the green chairman is meaningless for most members. (Worse yet is when the green chairman wants to make every drive so that if he hits a good shot he will just barely clear the hazard, but you won't. He never wants to build a tee where he himself can't make the carry, but the young bucks can.) If you're looking to add length to a course, it's better to find four or five holes where you can add length significantly instead of trying to extend every hole by five or ten yards.

The idea that architects **design their holes to be played with a driver and six-iron**, and that every player should have a tee from which they can play the hole with those same clubs and equal shot values, is absurd. Good golf holes work for all players, no matter what length they're playing from.

3. **Don't lengthen the shorter holes.** Short par-4's and reachable par-5's are a big part of what makes a golf course fun for the membership, and a short par-3 with a tightly guarded target can often be the best hole on the course. Adding twenty-five yards to those holes just plays into the long hitters' hands. Since the purpose of adding length is to make the course more challenging for the best players at the club, the best places to do it are at the longer holes, which are already out of reach of the average member.

4. **Don't judge a course by its scorecard.** Just because two par-4 holes measure the same length doesn't mean they feel the same or play the same. The cliché that players should "use every club in the bag" assumes that players hit their drives the same length throughout the round, and that's a false assumption. Besides, with modern equipment nobody swings a 5-iron differently than a 6-iron anyway; the cliché made more sense when players carried fewer clubs.

5. **There is no perfect yardage.** The idea that architects design their holes to be played with a driver and six-iron, and that every player should have a tee from which they can play the hole with those same clubs and equal shot values, is absurd. When I worked for Pete Dye, he said the only way to get the course to play the same for the members as for Tour pros was to build a set of tees at 5800 yards, but to lie and say those tees were 6200 yards — otherwise the members would refuse to play them. In fact, this often happens now, as clubs put one setup on the scorecard and rate it, but usually place the tee markers well ahead of where the official Course Rating was done. But there's no need for such shenanigans; good golf holes work for all players, no matter what length they're playing from.

6. **Trust the Slope System.** If it really works as it's intended, your Course Handicap should work out no matter which set of tee markers you play from.

7. **Wherever possible, shorten the walk instead of lengthening it.** On three or four of the courses I've built, we have asked for a Course and Slope Rating for the "Doak Tees," which simply means the closest tee to the previous green, whether it's the back tee or the forward tee or one in between. It usually improves both speed of play and variety of hole lengths.

8. **Look for new combinations instead of new tees.** Every course has forward and back tees; even if you just have two teeing grounds, there are more than 250,000 (2^{18}) possible setups in between your longest distance and shortest distance. If you've got three tees on each hole, you have 387 million potential combinations; you could probably hit any total yardage number you wanted to just by choosing different tees. Do you really need more flexibility than that? ■