

PACE OF PLAY

Summary of the main points

- 1. Players not being ready to play when the course is clear or it's their turn**
- 2. Elaborate pre-shot routines that take too long**
- 3. Not playing a provisional ball when the original is in some doubt**
- 4. Players not calling faster golfers through soon enough**
- 5. General greenside etiquette**
- 6. Marking cards on tees when someone should be hitting**
- 7. Not following or watching offline shots closely enough**

Some of the results make for slightly surprising reading for those fearing the end of golf is nigh unless things change! While 60% of the 56,000 respondents felt they would enjoy golf more if it didn't take so long, 70% were largely happy with how long it took, and only 4% never happy. Pace of play was cited as only the third biggest obstacle to participation, well behind work commitments and family commitments, though all three are undoubtedly inter-related.

It may be that our ever-busier lifestyles are exacerbating the issue. But even if 70% of golfers are largely happy with pace of play, clearly 30% are not and perhaps this is the crux of the matter. When considerably smaller percentage shifts are sufficient to set the alarm bells ringing at many clubs, it must be an issue worth investigating.

Most dyed-in-the-wool golfers are probably in too deep with the game to be driven away, but if pace of play is affecting the enjoyment of occasional golfers such that they have little inclination to play more, or deterring newcomers from getting more fully involved, we need to look at every way possible of bringing down round times.

So what can be done? We've all read lists of contributing factors as long as our arms, and the accompanying series of 'beating slow play' videos takes a closer look at what we feel to be the main causes, along with one or two practical solutions. Some are down to player behaviour and awareness, others to the club or course manager, for there are some factors at play over which individual player has little or no control.

Pace of play remains one of golf's most talked-about issues, and there's no doubt that some people do get very upset when they fall victim to an unacceptably slow round. We hope that our series of video stories might go some small way to shaving a few minutes off round times either through golfers modifying their behaviour just a little, or clubs having a slight rethink in one or two areas...

1. Be ready to play when it's your turn

We feel that one of the biggest causes of slow play is the golfer simply not being ready to play when it is his or her turn on tee, fairway or green, or when the course ahead is clear. Golf is not a race, so you don't have to be relentless in your pursuit of the finishing post. But you do need to be ready to go as soon as it's your turn rather than a minute afterwards, to prevent unnecessary frustration for others in your group and all those behind you.

Advice

Start assessing your approach shot as you are walking to the ball, then have your distance measured, club selected, glove on and shot planned out while others are playing, rather than starting the whole process after they have played. There may be times when you can't do all of this as you're on someone else's line or close enough to distract them, but often you will be far enough away to be able to do everything well ahead of your shot. On the putting green you can get a general idea of your read when first approaching the green, and again, as long as it doesn't distract anyone, you can be working on your line while others are putting. Don't wait until it is your turn to start the whole process.

2. Keep pre-shot routines in check

We will all have played with people whose pre-shot routines go on forever, and will probably all have started to walk on a practice swing we had wrongly assumed simply must be the real thing! If your routine involves assessing the yardage, carefully selecting your club, standing behind the ball with club out in front of you, partial practice swings away from the ball to groove key moves, then three more adjacent to the ball before finally hitting, you're unlikely to be the most popular playing companion at your club, and unlikely to be helping overall pace of play.

Advice

We all want to give ourselves the best chance of playing to our potential, and instructional advice seems to increasingly advocate an ordered pre-shot preparation. But there has to be some sort of balance. By all means adopt a routine before hitting, but not to a degree that might adversely affect others. Is there any part of your routine you could be doing while others are playing, or you could condense down to a level where the benefits to you are not at the cost of the enjoyment of others?

3. If in doubt, play a provisional ball

Of all the scenarios covered here, this one probably has the greatest potential to impact adversely on round times. Rule 27-2 specifically allows you to follow a procedure that will keep delays to a minimum when you've hit your ball offline. Yet golfers often spurn the chance to do so, perhaps out of frustration or a refusal to accept that they might be in trouble. But if you don't take a provisional ball and can't then find the original, the impact on your group's round time could be 10 to 15 minutes, factoring in the five-minute search and the long walk back. There will be a negative impact on all those behind you too, other than the group waved through.

Advice

Adapt your provisional ball strategy to err more on the side of caution, so if there is any doubt at all, or no-one has really seen it even if you think it should be okay, play a provisional. It really is a case of 'nothing lost!' By all means, listen to what others say about whether they've seen it land and where, but if you're unconvinced, for the sake of another 20 seconds, play a provisional ball to keep to an absolute minimum any risk of you having to do the long walk back.

4. Wave people through sooner

The etiquette section in the Rules of Golf requires slower groups to wave faster groups through, yet often this doesn't happen. Golfers seem reluctant to be overtaken, and we've all probably watched the group ahead start running between shots rather than waving us through. Similarly, if it comes at all, the call-through when players are searching for a ball seems to often come too late to be of any real pace of play benefit.

Advice

Don't be embarrassed to wave people through if they are clearly playing faster than you and the course ahead is clear. Nobody really likes feeling hassled, and nobody really likes being held up. The whole scenario is not quite as straightforward as some make it out to be, as on a busy course, constant waving through will only ever impact negatively on those further down the field. But on a less busy course, waving faster groups through sooner rather than later keeps everyone happy – they're off and away, while you no longer have someone breathing down your neck. If you can't find your ball and the hole ahead is clear, call those behind through early in the search rather than waiting nearly five minutes to do so.

5. Get it right up at the green

A lot can go wrong at the green in terms of pace of play, and it's doubly frustrating for those behind to have to witness the whole laborious process if the course beyond is clear. We've already covered being ready to putt when it's your turn, but golfers will often leave their clubs in the wrong place for a speedy exit when everyone has putted out; they may cause delays by not taking their putter with them if they have to chip before putting; or they may even stand on the green totting up their score and marking their card while those on the fairway are waiting to play into the green.

Advice

Find the exit point and try whenever possible to leave your bag there so you can head straight off when everyone has putted out, rather than adding in another 70-80 yard round trip. If you have to chip and putt, other than in very wet weather, take your putter with you, rather than chipping then walking back to fetch your putter. Never mark your card on the green if others are waiting to play in, and don't leave whoever is last to hole out to also replace the flag – someone else should have it in hand ready to pop back in.

6. Mark cards at the right time

We've separated this one out from our general 'not being ready' as it's such a common occurrence. A group will arrive at the next tee, then spend a minute or two sorting out the scorecards rather than anyone actually stepping up and hitting a ball. Again, all the more frustrating if the group behind has to watch this being acted out with a clear fairway or green beyond!

Advice

If it's clear to play, the only priority on the next tee is for the person with the honour to be ready to hit – or anyone if you're playing 'ready golf' and someone else is ready to go first. There's plenty of time to mark cards while others are hitting. So if you know it's you to go first, have your glove on ready to tee it up as soon as you get there.

7. Not watching where you've hit it

Golf is a frustrating game, which can push us to the very edge. A bad shot at a crucial moment can be almost too much to bear sometimes, and rather than following the errant shot closely, it's all too easy to spin away in disgust, frustrated by our own inability. Unfortunately, it's at just such times that we are best served by following the ball as closely as possible to give ourselves the best chance of finding it and keeping any dropped shots to a minimum. It's also not in the best interests of the field behind if we have to spend some time looking for a ball we didn't really follow, and possibly even traipsing back to the tee if we neglected to play a provisional.

Advice

Resist any temptation to turn away in dismay when you've sprayed one offline and try to follow the ball closely for any clues as to where it might end up. Did you see it down; did it bounce; which tree did it land closest to? You can't do any of this if you're wheeling away in disgust! If you're playing into the sun, ask others to help follow the ball as you may struggle to pick up its flight. And don't be embarrassed to run to the end of the tee post-impact if it will give you a better view of the ball's flight.