

The Truth About Slow Play

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Does a 5 hour round make you crazy? Does slow play make you want to bend the shaft of your 3 iron around the heads of the group in front of you?

There is very little golfers can agree on (one set of rules vs. two, the ball should be ratcheted back vs. it should go longer, anchoring the putter is ok vs. it is evil), but the subject of slow play brings them together like no other. Everyone associated with the game understands that slow play is killing the enjoyment of the game and the level of participation. A study by Frank Thomas, former USGA Technical Director, found it to be the number one obstacle to growing the game.

Ask anyone what causes slow play? Almost universally the answer is the group ahead. The only time that's not the answer is when someone says, no it's not them. It's the group ahead of them. It's far more complicated than that.

What's the solution? Some say walk faster. Some say give short putts or make the slow players play later in the day. Some say pick up when you're out of the hole. Some say wave up on par 3s. Others say play the forward tees. There is no shortage of suggestions. Everyone has an opinion. But what really works? What will really make a difference?

Unfortunately slow play is somewhat like the weather which everyone complains about but can't do anything to change it. However unlike the weather, something can be done about slow play. The big obstacle to correcting the problem – I believe - has been the lack of a thorough understanding of what causes slow play. I've done the research needed to provide that understanding.

My research, doing hundreds of simulations and statistical analyses, indicates it is far more complicated than any of those simple answers. As a matter of fact if you ask me, my research indicates the answer to the question "who is responsible for slow play" is **We All Are!**

Yes everyone involved in the game contributes in some small way (in some cases in some large ways) to slow play. It's not just "the other guy." Some of the causes are within our powers as golfers. Some are not. Some are determined by course management but not all. Some are caused by course designers without knowing it. But no one is without any guilt. Dean Knuth, former USGA Director of Handicapping and now Golf Digest Contributing Editor, says that in a round of golf, we "play golf" (swinging the club) for about 60 minutes and walk for about 2 hours. Everything else is waiting. What causes all that waiting?

To explain that, I have divided the major causes of pace problems into three categories: individual player and group behaviors, course management decisions, and designer plans. I will discuss them separately, but keep in mind they are all linked. *There is no simple silver bullet solution.* A solution will only come when we recognize the contribution of each.

First let's consider the most obvious – slow players. Without question a slow player slows down a group and a slow group slows down the whole course. A group can't finish a hole until the slowest player finishes and a slow group sets the pace for every group behind.

Answer: As an individual, move to your own ball at a speed of at least 3mph (100 yards a minute) and be ready to hit when it is your turn – take *no more* than 45 seconds to hit. Take no more than 3 minutes to look for a lost ball or to take relief. As a group, your group should take no more than 3 minutes to clear the tee, fairway landing area (once there) and the green complex. Not moving to your own ball and being ready to hit will add up to one hour to your group's pace.

It is obvious that the slowest group determines the pace for all groups behind. But my research shows something not obvious and more important. If every group was a “fast group” overall but had one or two slow holes (a lost ball, a three putt green etc.), the pace for the course would be the sum of the slow holes for each group on the course. As such each group when they have a slow hole has contributed to a slow pace. This is because it is harder to play fast than to play slowly. It is hard to make up the time you lost especially if as you are trying to make it up, the group ahead is having their slow hole.

Answer: Recognize that you and your group are probably part of the problem even if most of the time you are playing quickly. Do whatever you can to make up for lost time and keep up with the group ahead.

Next, let's consider designers. The USGA Slope System was a huge advance in golf handicapping. Unfortunately developers decided that to get their money's worth, they needed the highest slope course around. As such architects were pressured to design courses with lots of difficulty factors. The more difficult the course, the more strokes, the longer it takes to play. More difficulty, more lost balls, more time to search. Often these new courses had long walks between green to tee, just adding time but no additional golfing enjoyment. The original rules in Edinburgh said “ye shall tee your ball no further than a club from the previous hole.” Boy, have times changed. I estimate designers have added 30 to 60 minutes per round.

Answer: Never play a course whose slope is more than 142 minus your handicap index. Play it all the way forward if you can't follow this rule.

Now let's look at what I consider to often be the biggest culprits: course managers. There are two aspects of what course managers do that affects pace of play. First is course set up. The height of the rough, the speed of the greens, the tee marker placements all can add up to more shots and more time.

Answer: Course managers should monitor the time it takes to play each hole and make adjustments to their course set up. They should study the USGA's Course Pace of Play Rating Manual (developed by Knuth) and use consultants such as Bill Yates or Steven Southard who study such concerns.

The second issue with course managers is far more complicated. Tee intervals are the main culprit to slow play. Course managers are naturally inclined to set tee intervals which are too short. They “please” more groups by getting more onto the course. But in the same way in which too many cars on a highway actually slows everyone down, too many groups causes the pace to deteriorate significantly. Without going into too much detail, a tee interval shorter than the time it takes to play the longest par 3 will cause the pace to increase well beyond a reasonable four hour amount. *In fact a 4 and one half or 5 hour round is guaranteed by a too short tee interval no matter how well the individual players and groups play.* There is nothing the golfers can do to overcome the fact that there are too many groups on the course. Tee intervals less than 10 minutes almost certainly cause pace problems.

So why do the course managers do it? They do it because they make more money (at least in the short run) by stuffing more groups on the course. Spreading out the tee intervals to a length which would allow a four hour round would require about a 15% to 20% increase in green fees to compensate for the lower number of paying customers. It is a terrible predicament.

Answer: Advocate for proper tee intervals even if it means an increase in green fees.

There are places who have figured out that it takes many things for the pace to be less than four hours. It takes a good course set up, with the proper tee interval, with golfers who move quickly to their own ball, are ready to hit when it is their turn, don't waste time looking for lost or water logged balls, who pick up the pace when they fall behind, and recognize that we are all in it together.

It's complicated. It will take a comprehensive effort. But there is a hierarchy to the plan. Doing it out of sequence will make subsequent efforts fruitless. Here's the plan:

1. Get course managers to set up courses which are challenging but not brutal (pace sensitive.)
2. Set Tee Intervals appropriately.
3. Institute waive up policies on par 3s.
4. Train and reward all golfers in proper individual pace behaviors.
5. Provide feedback on group behaviors.

What's important to note here is the sequence is the reverse of what most people's intuition would tell them. That has to be recognized or we will make no progress.

One last thing: If you want to be part of the solution, **join the Three/45 Golf Association (Three45golf.org)** to show your support for pace of play advocacy. According to my research, we will only make improvements when we bond together and recognize we are all part of the problem and therefore all part of the solution.