



The lifespan of a Golf Course.

May I propose a hypothesis. I propose that every golf course has a lifespan. I say this as the basis for a discussion that if accepted comes with several important conclusions- the most important of these being the serious issue of increasing costs for you, the golfer.

To start, let's first define what a lifespan is first. My dictionary says:

life span (n)

1. the length of time that a member of a particular species can be expected to remain alive
2. the length of time that something can be expected to last or function

Nothing lasts indefinitely. So how long are golf courses, and the features that go to comprise them, expected to function?

The demise of a golf feature is often caused by three main factors. Either the poor preparation when constructed, over use or more extreme use, or inadequate maintenance. The life of an entire course can be restricted by the same factors, but also by such things as technology, water availability, environmental regulations etc. The sad result of either eventuality is the permanent or temporary closure of the course.

So to avoid these frustrating closures, what must be done to maximise the lifespan of features? Firstly, good design practices must be followed. Or, in design lingo, form must follow function. To cite an example of form following function, consider a door. Doors are 6'6" because people must walk through them. In golf, a small green that was designed to withstand 15,000 rounds per year 60 years ago, may fail completely under pressure of 30,000 rounds. The fundamentals of form are size, access, light, air circulation, water and drainage.

Secondly, golf courses should be maintained correctly. Modern golf course set-up desires and maintenance practices have contributed to the demise of some courses. The low cutting heights necessary to produce fast greens greatly reduce the ability of the turf to withstand traffic. The faster speeds likewise "amplify" the contouring of the greens. Hole locations that were considered reasonable at 7 feet on the stimpmeter are often out of the question at 9 feet. This effectively makes the usable area of the green much smaller, and contributes to the wear and compaction issues that often spark calls for the renovation of greens.

So how long should we expect to get out of certain features on the golf course? The USGA suggest of that a very general rule is that the construction should last at least 20 years. While this seems short considering the stringent set of specifications that define what is, and how one can build a USGA type

green, the USGA argue that over a 20 year period there are likely to be major changes in the golfer's expectations for how the greens should be maintained, and there could very well be major changes in the amount of play the courses receives.

The life of a tee is harder to ascertain. They most often die due to overuse, but some are also estranged after the uptake of new playing equipment. E.g. in St Andrews, the tees on the 15th hole of the Old Course were extended back about 40 yards in 1993, then another 43 yards in 1997. Then, in 2003/4 six other holes received new championship teeing grounds in an attempt to compensate for new balls like the Titleist Pro V1, and the 'spring-faced' drivers. Tees of a good size are where for every 1000 rounds of play a course receives per year, 100 sq feet (9.3m²) of useable tee area is provided. For Par 3's and tees where irons are used, this area should be doubled.

How about bunkers then? Revetted bunker faces have a lifespan of 2–5 seasons. Some can last longer, an others may need to be rebuilt annually, but in general these stacks of sod do not last long. They dry out, get hacked to death and will eventually collapse if not rebuilt. Typical bunkers with grass faces may last longer. However, in windy exposed places, the sand in the bunkers may not stay there more than one day. Rain can also be damaging. Erosion of the sand faces can happen after a storm event and cause costly and aesthetic damage to bunkers. If unlucky, this can happen before course has even opened!

So what are the implications of all this for us golfers? Constant change and increased costs. Why? Constant change because greens and tees are built from natural products and exist in a natural environment, therefore they are subject to the laws of the nature, so must move toward degradation. And while green keepers are employed to slow this erosion and maintain the quality of the playing surfaces, when the systems of a golf course such as the greens drainage and irrigation start to fail, more significant operations must be performed. Additionally, when new equipment challenges the playing strategy of the course, or changes in the game alter the function of the features, architects must change the forms- and this has process will incur costs.

Golf is dynamic. Changes in the life of the course, just like changes to our lives, are guaranteed. So while it is difficult predict the life span of a golf course, but we can be sure that over used, under sized and poorly maintained greens, tees and hazards will not survive indefinitely. The best we can hope is that what operations are required are done quickly and correctly, and maintenance techniques are appropriate so no extra costs are passed onto us – the golfers.