

## Symposium on Affordable Golf White Paper

*“I do not want to have to think twice about the green fee, or have to plan my round months in advance. Getting around in 4 hours or less is the goal. Frills are not attractive. I just want to play golf, its own reward.”*

- Dr. Neal Robinson (A golfer from Houston, Texas)

For my twenty years in the golf industry, I often came to the conclusion that golf was too expensive for the average person. Partially this came from me being that average person, but more so from watching the activities within the golf industry that just didn't make sense. I just do not see the logic in paying \$90.00 for a random round of golf on a random golf course, let alone \$300.00 in a resort setting for the same number of golf holes that may not be much better. Nor do I think the ancestors of this game ever imagined golf as a pastime strictly for the elite.

Unfortunately many in the golf industry have imagined exactly that (and much more) which led me to bring together a variety of topics and speakers to discuss the affordability of the game, an idea I have considered for more than a decade. So on Monday November 8<sup>th</sup>, seventy-five people whose passion - and for many in attendance, livelihood - is the game of golf, met to discuss that very question at the inaugural **Symposium on Affordable Golf** in Southern Pines, North Carolina.

The range of topics was developed to cover a broad range of considerations within the golf industry that include development, operations, and maintenance considerations as it relates to the cost of golf. Each topic had one commonality – golf can be affordable by looking to many ideas that are already implemented within the industry, some of which are often not considered as mainstream concepts by the industry and the golfer alike. Listed below were the topics of discussion (in order):

- i. Environmental Strategies That Can Also Make the Game More Affordable.
- ii. The Simplicity of Golf Course Management in the British Isles
- iii. Cost-Conscious Lessons to Learn from the Golden Age
- iv. Pace of Play: Affordable Golf is Quality Golf
- v. The Folly of Replicating Tournament Conditions

Two golf courses were chosen to provide case studies of their development and operations, Wild Horse Golf Club in Gothenburg, Nebraska and Herndon Centennial Golf Course in Herndon, Virginia. These case studies were opposite in ways – geographically, privately-owned versus municipally-owned – but they were built for the sole purpose of providing affordable golf for the people in their towns. They were also successful in providing that amenity while being profitable in the current economy.

Our slate of speakers came from a variety of backgrounds and represented many well-known entities in all aspects of the golf industry. Some make their living as entrepreneurs in the business and others work for non-profit organizations that help to promote the game of golf in different ways. Some speakers are on the front-lines of the industry providing the end-user with a place to play, others consulted on how to successfully develop, maintain, or operate golf courses. We also had speakers who made their living commenting on all things golf. Listed below were the speakers who participated in the day's discussions (in alphabetical order):

Ron Boyd, President and Co-Founder, Williamsburg Environmental Group  
Alan Chainey, Former Captain, North Berwick Golf Club  
Jaime Diaz, Senior Writer, Golf Digest & Golf World  
Gene Fleming, Director of Golf, Herndon Centennial Golf Course  
Kevin Fletcher, Ph.D, Executive Director, Audubon International  
Ron Forse, President, Forse Design  
Don Graham, General Manager, Wild Horse Golf Club  
Greg Lyman, Environmental Programs Director, Golf Course Superintendents Association of America  
Josh Mahar, Golf Course Superintendent, Wild Horse Golf Club  
Richard Mandell, President, Richard Mandell Golf Architecture  
Tim Moraghan, Principal, ASPIRE Golf Consulting  
Jim Moriarty, Golf Writer, Golf Digest & Golf World  
Ran Morrissett, Founder, GolfClubAtlas.com  
Bill Yates, Founder, Pace Manager Systems

Symposium attendees came from as far away as British Columbia, Canada and Scotland. They included representatives from the USGA and GCSAA as well as superintendents from courses which have hosted USGA majors in the past (and will in the future as well). Additional golf course superintendents, golf professionals, owners, and general managers were in attendance as well. This gathering also included a key constituency as part of the discussions – the golfer. That is how we will get things accomplished regarding affordable golf - by hearing from the golfer's mouth.

Roughly fifteen percent of the group was indeed just simply people who played the game. These are golfers who make their livings elsewhere but feed their souls on the golf course. The Symposium is the first time the industry and the end-user came together with a single objective – to preserve the game we love and try to ensure its economic viability in an affordable way. Can the game of golf save the business of golf or are the two inextricably separated by a chasm of contradiction?

Our gathering was not an attempt to create “cheap golf”, but affordable golf at different price points. No one wants to make the game cheap, but there are many things that can be universally done to make the game more affordable at many levels, whether you are operating Pebble Beach or a municipal course in Nebraska. Much of the Symposium was intended to showcase those things more so than solve problems many think are unsolvable.

A primary goal of the Symposium was to leave with concrete ideas that can be applied to improve the golf experience, cut unnecessary spending at any level, and bring more people to the game at an appropriate price point. Following is a report of what was discussed, learned, questioned, and opined by the speakers and attendees of the first Symposium on Affordable Golf:

### ***What is Affordable?***

The Symposium began with an open discussion to tackle the very question of what is “Affordable Golf”. Is there even such a thing as affordable? Do we want affordable to be the mantra? Does affordable mean cheap? Webster’s definition is, “*within an individual’s financial means*”. Consensus

was quickly made that affordable golf means different things to different people. There are many price points in golf that can be affordable for a variety of economic levels.

We all agreed that not only is affordable a subjective term, the perception of “affordable” may be even more subjective. Varying perceptions of affordability influence the attractiveness of the game. In other words, golfers sometimes confuse affordable with cheap and therefore not worthy. This thought process is the very root of the problems with the golf industry: The perception of an elitist sport must have an expensive price tag.

Perceptions are derived from feelings, regardless of the subject matter. There is the perception that high prices must clearly lead to good feelings and low prices must clearly lead to bad feelings. Why do we feel that way? Bill Yates, of Pace Manager Systems, pointed out in his presentation that many associate good with quality. To Bill, the challenge to the golf industry is creating value, “You can buy low or high, but there can always be high quality” according to Mr. Yates. “You can play either a muni or high-end or resort, they could all be of high quality or value.” That doesn’t mean their green fees should all cost the same, though.

So maybe we are focusing on the wrong things. Maybe we shouldn’t think strictly costs. Could it be that other terms are more appropriate in describing the challenges of making the game more attractive to the golfer? Should we be focusing on “Quality Golf” instead of “Affordable Golf”? If we indeed focus on quality, what elements does one consider as a quality issue? We identified a few:

- Condition of the course.
- Reliability (you know what you are getting).
- Consistency of experience (whether good or bad). Within this experience there are both physical and emotional considerations.

The physical considerations are what you actually see such as poor grass quality or, lack of direction from the parking lot to the pro shop to the first tee. These are items that must be physically designed and managed. The success of how one designs and manages these elements leads to the emotional considerations such as pace of play, bad service, or a memorable experience.

As we continued the attempt to define affordable, we utilized two more words that may just as well define our goals to bridge the game of golf with the business of golf:

**Profitable:** We all want operations to be profitable to a point. Just lowering fees in order to lose money quickly is not what the discussion of affordable golf is about. Lowering fees and cutting expenses will only hurt in the long run.

**Sustainable:** Economically sustainable results in profitability and affordability working in a symbiotic relationship.

Although *affordable* was a relative term on many levels, *sustainable* and *profitable* are terms that need to go hand in hand with affordable and are concepts which can apply to the success of the golf experience for both the end user *and* the operator. Ron Boyd of Williamsburg Environmental Group, Inc. was quick to point out that “sustainable” was more than just an environmental term. It

is a balance between social aspects of life, economics, and the environment. Sustainable means to create a system to maintain the way people live, survive financially, and protect the environment where these activities take place (whether we are talking golf or babysitting).

Greg Lyman of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America likens sustainability to understanding the best interests of the community, one's business, and the environment. "In today's world, we need to link up progress environmentally and save money to add directly to the bottom line. How to be more efficient, directly reduce cost, and manage risk on the expense side [define a sustainable golf product]" said Lyman. He also clarified a GCSAA stance on sustainability as "Simply committing to continue improvement". According to Lyman, no matter what property one has one can enter in anywhere along the spectrum and commit to continue improvement.

At first, it seems counter-intuitive to flush out the term "profitable" in a discussion about affordability and the negative look upon greed and profits that was bound to follow when discussing high costs. But at closer examination, a healthy industry is one that deserves to make some profit, for no other reason than to motivate businesses to provide a good product. As a result, the possibility of bringing people to a game supported by a healthy industry will provide stability. If the game is not sustainable economically at any level, then the industry will cease to continue. If operators prop up a business model that constantly falls into the red, access to the game will suffer as well.

While no one expected to finalize the definition of "affordable" as it relates to the business of golf, the discussion did bring about some clarity as to how golf does not have to be one price and that the game can be experienced at different levels. More importantly, it was evident that there are common practices that can apply to a variety of facilities to be more sustainable and profitable, yet provide a memorable experience to the golfer. Tackling issues of cost will only help to open the door for more people to pick up the game and shine a brighter light on the industry as a whole.

### ***The Perception of Golf***

As the day's discussions unfolded, the speakers and attendees clearly established that perception of the game and the business of golf has a major effect on the challenges the industry faces today and going forward. Problems abound as a result of both the golfer's and the industry's perception of the game of golf.

But which of those perspectives actually has an effect on the bottom line of affordability? Has the golfer's perception of the game created undue expectations that have forced the game into a volatile business model? Or is the industry's perception of the game that has unduly forced excess onto the business and as a result priced the game out of many player's wallets and pocketbooks? Somewhere along the line golfers contributed to that perception as well. Nonetheless, it is apparent to most that golf is generally too expensive.

## *Some Reasons Why the GOLFER'S Perception of Golf May Discourage Affordability*

- **The game's perceived reputation as a sport for the rich.**

The game of golf was originally developed as a common man's game in the British Isles. Many ancient games such as the German 'kolbe' and Roman 'paganica' are considered predecessors to the modern game of golf. The ancient Dutch games of 'het kolven' and 'kolf' were most likely the impetus for traders to begin smacking rocks with sticks along their walk from their ships to the Town of St. Andrews on land now known as the Old Course. There is a clear reason why St. Andrews is considered the Home of Golf.

From its earliest days until the game arrived in the United States, golf was a sport of the people. Only upon its arrival on American shores did it become a sport for the elite, mostly because only the upper classes could afford to travel overseas and bring back the implements needed to introduce the game to the locals. Only the well-off could afford to secure enough land to build fields upon which the game can be experienced. As time went into the twentieth century, these like-minded (and of similar economic stature) enthusiasts established clubs for the sole purpose of playing the game.

In a flash, golf went from a simple pastime to a game for the elite. That evolution has a lot to do with the gradual rising expense of the game and the perception that it is one of high quality (only for the rich). Just as true in other aspects of society, golfers automatically attribute high quality with expense.

Bill Yates stressed that a quality experience can be had regardless of cost to the golfer. "It is not the price of the green fees that make a round of golf good or bad, it is the delivered experience that makes it good or bad. Consistent quality is the key to success." There is no reason an affordable golf course can't provide a great quality experience, so there shouldn't be a stigma toward low fees being bad" said Yates.

In golf course design a client may not value an innovative idea if it is also very simple to achieve and inexpensive to incorporate. This is another reason why the golfer's perception (or in this case the owner or greens chairman) about golf course construction has driven development costs upwards. Often times, a simple solution is actually the better solution. That is what one calls great design. It is bad design that will cost money in the long run.

- **There is clearly a difference between the top golfers in the world and the rest of us. We must all stop acting like there isn't.**

As Director of Championship Agronomy for the United States Golf Association for two decades, Tim Moraghan had the experience of setting up the toughest venues for the biggest golf tournaments in the world for the greatest golfers in the world. For that amount of time and longer, Jim Moriarty and Jaime Diaz wrote about those same events and players. When asked about the attitudes the professional golfer has toward course conditioning, they all expressed that the golfer who is at the pinnacle of the game and

makes a living by shooting the lowest possible score wants a golf course that the average person wants no part of.

Both Jim and Jaime agree that the hardest conditions demonstrate who has the best skills and that is what leads to the lowest scores and the most success in professional golf. “They (pros) have certain expectations of quality of setup that is very expensive and difficult to achieve.” said Moriarty, “Pros feel that the harder it is, the more the skilled players will come through.” Jaime points out conditions are not strictly about looking good on TV either. “There is a misconception by golfers. Players expect to create conditions that the best player will win. It isn’t just to look good on TV, it is to determine skill. The greens chairman and regular golfer miss that.” To Diaz, there is no reason why we shouldn’t have different course setup for regular golfers.

The problem is that the average golfer wants to experience course setup at the highest level when the average golfer should experience course setup that allows for simple enjoyment of the game. The average golfer is simply not good enough to experience those conditions. Moraghan shared some statistics that bear this theory out. “The bottom line is the average handicap index is 14.7. This means a golfer is barely breaking 90 at their own golf course,” shared Tim. We must stop running the golf business as if the end-user plays like the professional.

- **Course set-up for the professional can NOT be the same for the average golfer.**

Because the professional golfer is best identified by difficult conditions and the average golfer should be placed in a setting to optimize the enjoyment of the game, many course set-up specifics for professionals are counter-productive to the success of the average golfer. Maintaining those same set-up standards is very costly and time consuming. Tim Moraghan pointed out that excessive length of golf courses and height of cut for golf course features are the primary elements that inhibit the enjoyment of the game for the average player.

According to Tim, most people know that excessive green speeds are detrimental to the average golfer’s score, but they fail to recognize why. “The easy thing is to putt on those surfaces. The hard part is actually getting on the green in the first place,” he said. In other words, it is very hard to stop a golf shot without the proper trajectory on a slick putting surface. Short game shots equally become more difficult to control, particularly when played from the same tight lies the professional thrives on. Those tight lies extend to the fairway at the artificial height of 3/8”. Only the professional has enough experience to strike the ball consistently enough to handle such low grass heights on a regular basis.

The reality is that in no other sport is the playing field set up for the professional and the recreational player alike. Jim Moriarty grew up in Northern Indiana and often traveled to Wrigley Field, which he likened to as his own emerald city. “It is the entertainment and the show. That is [also] what Augusta provides. That is fine but you shouldn’t expect it to be the same at home,” said Moriarty. Augusta National to the average member’s club is not as Wrigley Field is to a local park’s baseball field. Yet that is a problem in the golf business as many force that to happen and on a regular basis.

- **What is seen on television cannot be achieved at most facilities.**

What is seen on television cannot be achieved at most facilities because the conditions we see each week on the screen are artificial at best and made for television. Tim Moraghan expands, “There is a ton of money and time and effort to prepare the tour player’s bunker on a weekly basis for what is known as shot opportunities. It is all for TV. The amount of time and money in preparing bunkers is extensive and starts months in advance. We were putting har-tru tennis court material in the sand to make it firm so they could get more clubface on the ball and increase the spin in places. The tour player goes to the trailer, gets his wedge re-ground and gets it set each week depending on the bunker sand.”

In the words of Alan Chainey, former Captain of North Berwick Golf Club in East Lothian, Scotland, “The professional game has become the standard and is now the public face of the industry. What we see on TV is not reality, but is sought after by clubs without the financial wherewithal to pull it off or sustain it.” Alan has noticed first-hand when the influence of perfect conditions is transferred from television to one’s home course.

North Berwick was forced to rise from a modest facility in the early eighties to one of impeccable conditioning because of the very influence of the addition of three new golf courses in recent years (two at Archerfield Links and one at Renaissance Links) as well as improved conditions at Muirfield and Gullane. The local standard in the area forced the expectations at North Berwick higher over the past 25 years. As a result, fees have risen to meet the demand.

Ran Morrisett, founder of GolfClubAtlas.com certainly pointed his finger at the influence of television promoting an unsustainable atmosphere desired by facilities that have neither the financial ability nor the clients to warrant such an effort. He also noted that there was good news in the concept that golf viewership for TV is in the decline.

- **The need for golf courses to be conveniently standardized and fair increases costs.**

One clear distinction between golf offerings in the United States and the British Isles is the attitude toward definition of golf course features. Not only is there a prevalence of ‘green’ found on American golf courses, there is the need to specifically define each feature’s edges, clearly define the direction of play for a golf hole, and the desire to standardize the game in terms of par and length.

For whatever reason, Americans think that the game of golf should be fairer than it actually was ever intended to be. The ‘rub of the green’ has been rubbed out on American golf courses in favor of convenience. That convenience is replacing those intangibles that make the game fun and interesting to our counterparts across the pond. Attendee Bill Dow considers a sterile golf environment lacking in excitement. “When the ball is rolling, you are thoroughly engaged in the thrill of the game. When you are throwing darts, that’s not.” Dow said. Fast and firm conditions are considered too wild for the average American golfer who eschews the ground game for a more comfortable and controlled aerial game, thus the proliferation of GPS in golf carts and detailed yardage books.

There are costs associated with this desire for definition in the construction and operation of golf courses. Design-wise, the need to create definition of features, eliminate any gray area when it comes to strategy, any elements of blindness, or the eradication of any interesting natural features which may be too difficult to maintain requires excessive earthmoving. It also requires increased limits of disturbance as outlined previously in this report.

Regarding maintenance, definition goes hand in hand with a high level of daily maintenance. Clear delineation of features is best developed through a mono-stand of turfgrass. As a result, low-maintenance grasses are frowned upon. Pristine sand bunker and pond edges require a great amount of labor and eliminate most of the character of a golf course as well.

The golf industry is simply making the game too convenient, most likely at the request of the golfer. The golfer is primed to go through the motions without enjoying the intangibles that make the game fun. For that, the golfer is missing out on the spirit of golf. Some of us call that simply uncluttered fun and it doesn't require extreme maintenance. "There is a certain serendipity that makes the game fun when it is not perfectly managed," stated Jaime Diaz. Although the R & A loves those conditions, the same cannot be said of the USGA and the PGA. The backlash from the Dustin Johnson controversy at Whistling Straits certainly will prevent any progress away from this issue being made anytime soon.

### ***Some Reasons Why the INDUSTRY'S Perception of Golf May Discourage Affordability***

- **The fallacy that being environmentally sustainable is too expensive and doesn't help.**

The discussion entitled *Environmental Strategies That Can Also Make the Game More Affordable* was intended to outline ten specific items to do just that. Instead, the talk took a turn toward looking at the golf course as a bundle of assets where the natural environment and the environment of the community can benefit. Much of the sustainable discussion centered on a focus of utilizing the assets of the golf course as a way to gain revenue through a variety of initiatives such as grants or mitigation banking.

According to Kevin Fletcher of Audubon International, the industry has done a poor job of utilizing those natural habitats to gain an advantage, even among those golf courses that have gone through Audubon's certification process. Although surveys have shown that within Audubon membership projects an average of 15-22 acres of habitat have been converted out of golf and into strictly habitat, few clubs have done anything beyond realizing the direct cost savings of that task alone.

"If you can sell that cost reduction as a value-added asset, it is good", he pointed out. He classified 10-15% of people as being "green-hearted" who will do things strictly because it helps the environment. Another 70% will only let environmental benefits tip the scale after other benefits. Yet the remainder will only respond to something that adds value and reduces operations and management.



In addition, not enough clubs are tracking possible monetary advantages of implementing an environmental program, lending credence to the inaccurate statement that being environmentally sustainable is too expensive. Of the 286 Certified Environmental Improvement projects within Audubon International's files, 55% said cost savings were realized, 36% said no savings were realized and 9% were not sure. No one commented on boosting revenue as a result of efforts. Of those 286, the projects who claimed no business value came from pure assumption because nothing was ever measured.

Audubon took the survey a step further with those 103 projects claiming no savings by identifying three different types of business value: Cost savings, revenue generation, and image and reputation enhancement. 60 of the 103 were identified as high likelihood of reducing costs, 30 had some likelihood for reducing costs, and the others did not. Unfortunately, the statistics beg the question that if the return on investment is not present will owners sell the value to the community?

- **In recent years a lack of honesty or integrity regarding real costs has disguised the true state of the industry.**

This bold statement was shared with the group in the *Define Affordable* discussion by writers and operators alike. Uncomfortably surprising, few people disagreed. Attendee Trevor Smith of Innovative Golf Management in British Columbia reiterated this thought toward the end of the day as well. "The reality is unless we get to a point where everyone gets to take their underwear off and show what it is they've got, I don't think we are going to get very far," he said.

Real estate income has often confused the true state of affairs for many golf courses in the past twenty years. Many residential golf courses were built strictly to sell real estate and never had the market to survive on its own. Real estate developers were giving golf away as well as opening up future private courses for public pay in the name of marketing. Whereas many real estate developments have shown a black bottom line, their golf operations were most likely in the red. As long as lots kept selling, no one cared until the keys to the facility were handed to the members.

- **Golf course rankings are a better marketing tool than the golf experience itself.**

The focus on golf course rankings has created an environment among golf course developers to create golf courses which are visually stunning more than designed for golfers to simply enjoy the game. This focus on aesthetics is a means to attract golfers who may be influenced by the numerous golf magazines' ranking of top courses, courses of the year, etc. The fact is that the "wow" factor gets attention in advertisements, especially when the caption declares that the golf course is ranked #1 in a certain sector (or #44 or #86, etc).

Many decisions are made in the design and construction of golf courses to create this "wow" factor from moving inordinate amounts of dirt to wall to wall irrigation. In addition, aesthetics are buoyed by the contrast of green grass, blue water, and white sand which costs money. As a result, those costs are transferred to the golfer.

Jaime Diaz remarked that the need to impress seems to be rewarded more so than providing a good product and does not like the end product, likening to it a cheap form of set design. “There is something organic about the experience of being there that is hard to define. It is not about a staged, Hollywood hole. It is expensive and slow and not what golf needs,” he pointed out.

***Other Reasons Golf May Not Be Considered Affordable:***

- **The game evolved into a profit center more than a recreational pursuit.**

Over the past twenty years, there was a proliferation of “non-golf” people entering the industry when it was flourishing. Again, that is expected in a variety of industries. But as more entered the industry, the level of entrepreneurship rose. Outsiders entered the business more as an opportunity to make money than to promote the game itself.

Attendees reflected on how the transition from “mom and pop” operations into a more corporate atmosphere may have pushed the game too far from its simple pursuit of recreation and enjoyment. The question that maybe golf wasn’t suited to be a multi-billion dollar industry was brought up. The idea that the business may have simply peaked and is in a correction mode was discussed as well. This peak may have arrived quicker than it naturally would have because of another outsider to the game: The residential developer who sought out golf as a means to sell homes more so than to promote the game.

- **Forcing golf into places where it shouldn’t be, both environmentally and economically.**

Over the past few decades, it seems as though the golf business has literally tried to fit square pegs into round holes regarding site selection, design and construction, maintenance, and operations. The construction of golf courses on unsuitable land in unsuitable locations for unsuitable reasons (to sell residential property) has increased expenses throughout the process.

In addition, the proliferation of residential golf course developments competing for the same business has watered down everybody’s product. Now more than ever it is difficult to make a decent profit for all. Extreme competition has led to slashing of expenses followed by discounting which result in business models that are destined to fail.

Environmentally, the difficulty in maintaining turfgrass quality that is not natural to specific climates has increased maintenance costs. The fast and firm conditions that originated from cool climates like the British Isles cannot be replicated in other climates without an excess of irrigation and other resources, which increase maintenance budgets.

- **Over-management of a golf course site.**

One lesson learned from studying the golf courses of the Golden age is utilizing restraint in building (or renovating) a golf course site that reduce the limits of disturbance (area of a site which is under construction) on a piece of land. The more one's limits are disturbed, the more expense is required to clear, shape, grass, irrigate, and maintain those limits. In most instances, many developed spots have no bearing on the golf experience. Their maintenance adds to the expense side of the ledger without translating into revenue.

“In the eighties and nineties the bulldozer went bananas” shares golf architect Ron Forse, “Some architects owned part of the shaping and they would get out and shape everything.” He also pointed out the more one moves the bulldozer around, the worse the soil structure becomes, affecting the soil's ability to naturally drain (regardless of soil type). In addition to the above costs associated with excess land disturbance, the need for additional subsurface drainage systems increases costs as well.

One of the things the great golf architects of the golden age did well was follow the mantra known as “form follows function”. The form of their features always matched the intended function. The modern golf business dictates certain maintenance and conditioning that limits the form of a certain feature. Function has become more about maintenance than strategy, challenge, or simple enjoyment of the game.

- **Over – management of golf operations**

Several Symposium attendees, with extensive professional experience running golf clubs, pointed to bloated management teams and excessive salaries as a major area that can torpedo finances. They felt proven ability and understanding of profit and loss needed to be primary criteria for selecting those running a facility. The ability to manage several responsibilities in a competent manner and forging a team approach were highlighted as a real way forward in the economic reality of controlling costs in the future. Many felt that management structures have grown so much that it seems almost every employee becomes a director of something.

Consensus was that we need a greater focus on reducing management and administrative costs, stripping out all that is non-essential to the golfing experience. Trevor Smith associates golf management like a boat's deck with a hole in it and no one knows where the leak is. “The way we have been managing golf is not working. There is too much excess in golf management now that it isn't easy to make money when the economy was good,” remarked Smith. As in all other business sectors, when things are rolling people tend to overlook the excess, but belt-tightening requires more scrutiny. Too much middle management in the golf business has probably contributed to lack of affordability.

## *Problems /Threats to the future of game*

- **A Cultural Shift in Society**

The great debate in the business has centered on the primary reasons for the dip in the golf industry: Cost or time. Time is a major factor that affects cost. When we discuss the time consideration, it is not just the time it takes to complete a round of golf but also the amount of personal time and energy that one is willing to dedicate to playing golf. The cost of golf and the time needed to play a round of golf are major factors in that consideration, but a cultural shift in our society has as much to do with the issue as anything else.

Gone are the days when the man of the house would leave the family behind and go to the club and play both weekend mornings. Gone are the days where a teenager would go down to the local course to caddy as a summer and weekend job. Gone are the days when the primary breadwinner could go down to the course after work and get a quick nine holes in.

In today's modern world, both the man and woman may very well be sharing in income duties as well as child-rearing duties. As children's extracurricular schedules get more and more crowded, little extra time is left for the parent to dedicate to his or her golf game. That is also true for the children. Nowadays, a child must focus on one sport to focus on and dedicate much more time than in the past just to keep up. Golf often ends up a loser when other, more affordable, choices may be baseball or soccer.

Despite the many offerings by the golf industry to bring children and teenagers into the game, most kids are not finding the access as easy as it once was because of the lack of caddy programs. The golf cart has become a major profit center for professionals and management groups so there is little incentive to promote caddying. The caddy-golf cart challenge is a battle between growing the game and strictly using the game to make money. Unfortunately, the cart is winning. As time goes on the game is losing the opportunity to grow from the ground up because of it.

Attendee Kris Shreiner, an Arborist by trade who came to the Symposium because of his passion for the game, noted that there seems to be poor support of caddy programs within golf's governing bodies. He also noted that about a third of the Symposium attendees found the game, in part, through caddying. "I don't believe it was a coincidence that [such a large] percentage with caddie roots were [at the Symposium] to support the game" Kris said.

In earlier times many learned the game by way of caddying. Caddying provided a depth of understanding about the game as well as a passion for golf that can sow the seeds for a lifetime commitment to the game. The lack of caddying does have a connection to the earlier observation that many golf industry people came into the game from a corporate atmosphere that may have lacked the passion needed to understand how to properly promote the game. Hence is the focus on things other than the enjoyment of golf (such as aesthetics, over-conditioning, convenience).

For the majority of people, golf is a complex game to learn and play well. Long and difficult courses, the slow pace of play, rising costs, and competition from many other leisure pursuits are all making it difficult to grow the game within this cultural change in society. We also have to recognize that the golfing population is changing, with the passing through of generations of male golfers who sought the country club golf lifestyle in the past.

- **The Myth of the Augusta Syndrome**

For many years there have been many critics of Augusta National, blaming the course for many of the industry's problems. Many shared at the Symposium that it isn't Augusta National that has made other golf courses become expensive ventures. It is actually all those other courses, operators, and greens chairmen who strove to replicate the Augusta National model without the financial means or market to support their efforts. In a perfect illustration of Josh Mahar's sage advice to not "keep up with the Jones", not only should the golf industry avoid replicating the Augusta appearance, they (me included) should also stop blaming Augusta for the industry's woes.

When asked if Augusta National was really the bad example that people point to, Tim Moraghan countered with the following: "I like Augusta National. They just quietly contribute to charity. They have their event at the perfect time of year. They never stepped up and said you must do it like this. They just do it. Should we follow it? No, most people can't. They don't have the unlimited budget to do it. Augusta is what it is."

Both Jim Moriarty and Jaime Diaz (fixtures at the Masters for many years) agreed. "It is very hard to find fault with how they do their event. It is singular and it should be singular. It is not the ideal setup for the game," declared Moriarty. Diaz feels Augusta is a great test of golf for the greatest players of the world. "It comes at a time of year where everyone is dying to see golf" said Diaz, "The emotional effect of that makes people want to emulate it."

At no point did the powers of Augusta National declare that their facility should be the model for the golf industry to follow. It is the golfing public's perception of Augusta that needs to be worked on in the public arena. Decision makers on both the private and public side must understand the amount of money spent to present the Masters to the world each year and see what it looks like the rest of the time (including closure for multiple months when bent grass is at its most stressed). If that were accomplished, then they would recognize that it is a business model that should not be followed without the budget to support it. In addition to charity, the profits from the Masters help support the expenses of that club.

- **A continued focus on aesthetics over strategy and playability.**

One cost-conscious lesson to be learned from the Golden age is that strategy can always keep a golfer's interest and allows for playability at all talent levels. Aesthetics always took a back seat to strategy. Strategy can last forever but aesthetics eventually fade, unless you want to continually pay for facelifts. The cost in maintaining aesthetics exceeds the cost to maintain strategy.

There are many reasons for the recent trend toward aesthetics that include golf course magazine rankings, real estate development, and an influx of outsiders coming into the golf industry who don't understand the concepts of golf course strategy or the inherent difficulty in hitting the golf ball. The route into the business from outside rather than through the caddy ranks, for instance, results in many not learning about the game for the game's sake. Instead, the business was the attraction first. The result is not recognizing the intangibles of the game a golfer comes to appreciate through playing.

Residential golf requires capital for the aesthetic need to sell homes more than anything else. "Every hole has to look stylish because a home is going to be on it." said Ran Morrissett. "You have a lot of exposed sand way off on both sides that is superfluous for the sake of selling homes or the sake of dressing up the course. Then you are just locking yourself into ongoing maintenance creating a cycle where there is not affordable golf" Ran commented.

A focus on aesthetics over strategy will also inherently make the game more difficult not only for those who are just beginning, but for the majority of experienced golfers as well. The result can be a push back away from the game. All the initiatives to bring golfers into the game are worthless if just as many are leaving the game because it is too hard. The expense of the business will be spread among those that remain playing.

- **Construction and maintenance technology continues to raise the bar instead of making golf more affordable.**

Throughout the history of golf course architecture and development from its inception in the United States to present day, the trends that come out of technological advances in construction and maintenance never seem to make someone's job easier or more efficient for very long before someone decides to push the envelope even further. The consequences usually become more cost prohibitive. The golf industry is continually setting the bar higher and higher and chasing that bar.

For example, USGA-recommended greens construction was supposed to make the putting surface more consistent in terms of drainage and irrigation. Greens construction has instead allowed the industry to push the envelope with newer and better turfgrasses. The same thing happens as each grass is developed. We have warm-season grasses on fairways in Maryland and we have cool-season grasses on putting surfaces as far as South Florida. Why is golf expensive? We are constantly using technology to accomplish things that are unnatural.

As new bunker construction techniques become more advanced we continue to demand better and better conditions. Steeper grass bunker faces can be mowed with special machinery. Steep sand bunker faces can maintain more angle of repose with a bunker drainage construction specification that exceeds greens construction in cost per square foot.

Irrigation companies annually present new parts that require a constant upgrade from clubs that may not realize much return on investment. Yet passing along the cost to the end-user

will help subsidize these advances. It seems that irrigation systems get more and more elaborate for fear of leaving just a few square feet neglected.

The golf industry may be at the point where technological advances have exceeded the rate of return for most facilities. Yet the fear of keeping up with the competition leads to excessive spending and rising costs for the golfer. We have successfully built push-up greens in different climates specifically because the cost of USGA greens would have been cost-prohibitive. The results are excellent putting surfaces of both cool and warm season grasses which demonstrate that older construction techniques can still be viable in the twenty-first century.

One of the Symposium's case studies, Wild Horse Golf Club in Gothenburg, Nebraska successfully built a golf course for \$1,354,500. This number included land costs, an irrigation system for \$600,000 and a clubhouse for \$440,000. Superintendent Josh Mahar helped build the course and from day one his mantra was simply, "Don't always do what the neighbor does." This included avoiding the most elaborate irrigations system available and USGA greens construction. "I wouldn't trade our (dirty sand) greens for USGA greens," he told the Symposium audience. Despite ignoring technological trends, Wild Horse has been consistently ranked in various publications among golf courses ten times more expensive to build.

- **The myth that cutting maintenance budgets is the answer to saving money.**

One interesting twist on the subject of affordable golf is the concern that while expenses need to be cut in order for many facilities to survive and thrive, many times these efforts are directed in the wrong direction. The knee-jerk reaction of most committees is to cut maintenance dramatically in order to lower costs. Attendee Kris Shreiner thought this is the last area that should be cut, provided quality leadership and cost oversight is in place. "Often, these budgets get cut and the core asset, the golf course presentation, suffers. Then the slide begins, as folks see that what they really joined for deteriorate," Shreiner said.

Studies must be made to see how much lowering a maintenance budget can really lower fees. For instance, if a maintenance budget of \$600,000 is cut in half, and that may only create a ten dollar green fee cut, the resultant budget can hasten the demise of a facility. Granted there are many seven-figure budgets that can cut expenses without too much backlash, but the lower-budget courses fighting for survival must be careful about wholesale cuts.

***Some Ideas to Make the Game More Affordable:***

- **Build on the right piece of property and for the right climate**

The golden age golf architects worked with the lay of the land for golf's sake and strategy. They assessed the site and responded accordingly, knowing the less impact on existing conditions, the better the product. Although this thought process seems more applicable to new construction, this same philosophy can apply to renovation work and day to day operations as well.

Granted there are far less ideal landscapes available for golf today when contrasted to the golden age, but choosing the correct site for golf more so than finding the most available piece of land (based on location or price) can often save money on the back end of a development project. The right site can result in a far superior product, a less expensive product to build and maintain, and a product that is more marketable.

Golden age architects went out of their way to find pockets of sand, knowing that the correct soil structure can go a long way to cost savings and labor reduction. “That is a lesson learned from studying the old courses. You did not build a golf course on very rocky, inhospitable terrain because you didn’t have the bulldozer to just go trash the land. Construction costs were dramatically reduced because you were building courses on land that was well-suited for good golf,” noted Ran Morrisett.

Golf architect Ron Forse agrees in the concept of ‘lay of the land architecture’. “One of the ways to have affordable golf is the design of topographic golf courses. You can make very interesting golf holes that people play long term which may only have eighteen strategically-placed bunkers. Why not cut a bunker into a knoll right over the line of play? It is visual and indicative of how to play the hole.” said Forse.

This architectural approach allows the land to dictate the strategy and the strategy to dictate the aesthetics instead of the modern approach to modifying the land to create visual landscapes. The former is enduring and affordable golf while the latter is costly to create and costly to maintain. Architects utilized natural features and drainage wisely by studying the sites in terms of design as well as agronomy. Something can be learned from keeping dirt work to a minimum as well.

- **Look for environmental opportunities to move money to the bottom line.**

The golf industry’s typical reaction to environmental regulation is a costly and lengthy endeavor that requires one-sided sacrifice. Whereas that may be true in many cases, our environmental experts agreed that the best defense is a good offense. If one tries to work the system to specifically reduce expense and move revenue to the bottom line, then environmental challenges can result in a win-win situation.

Greg Lyman outlined three primary elements to address in the golf industry. Each one of them can be directly tied to cost savings: water conservation, water quality protection, and energy conservation. Regulations have begun to promote mitigation banking which are opportunities for golf courses to develop revenue.

Ron Boyd sees ways to restore or enhance streams that can result in mitigation credits. Maintained areas can be taken out of play that could be created as wetlands with credits sold on the open market to eager entities. He cites stream credits selling for \$500 - \$600 per linear foot and wetland credits for \$40,000 - \$90,000 per acre in the Mid-Atlantic. “The next waves are nutrient credits and habitat credits to protect endangered species. There is no reason that golf courses couldn’t do the same thing,” claimed Boyd.



The golf industry is in a unique position because it is a business that is based on natural resources. Survey results from Audubon International have shown that there is a business value in better ways to manage the course in regards to habitat and landscape management, water use, and chemical use. Golf courses also offer an asset to the community that the Wal-Marts of the world don't: Green space and drainage watersheds. Kevin Fletcher urged Symposium attendees that if we manage our natural systems better we can create business value in the process.

- **Re-evaluate expectations, minimize perfection, and accept blemishes.**

American golf is characterized by many things, none more prevalent as the level of conditioning expected at in recent years. The mindset of needing clarity on many levels, the influence of television golf, and the perfect demands of residential golf courses in order to promote aesthetics are just some of the reasons why maintenance is such an important aspect of the American game.

That was not always the case in the United States and still is not the case in the British Isles where fast and firm conditions are achieved by a 'brown' attitude. The resistance to going 'brown' is that people think it really means that golfers will be playing on grass that is barely alive and that it won't translate well on television. The first step in implementing a 'brown' ideal is to develop clear maintenance standards that allow everyone to understand exactly what 'brown' means in developing reasonable expectations.

This new brown movement is a long time coming and is now forced upon the industry by recent economic conditions. Ran Morrisett sums it up best, "You can do all kinds of unnatural acts to make courses work in climates that simply aren't intended for that, but you are signing up for a lot of ongoing maintenance costs. When you get to an economic correction like the one we are in, those clubs are going to feel it. Those are fixed ongoing maintenance costs that are brutal to have when your membership starts dwindling." Here is what less maintenance will mean:

- Less green color (relatively speaking).
- Varying fast and firm playing conditions based on different climates.
- Less definition and clarity of line among golf course features.
- Less of a gap between natural systems and golfer expectations.

As Ran points out, the golfer may not have a choice when it comes to accepting the brown movement. Ron Forse believes that once the golf culture starts accepting a "ruddy" golf course that is conceived as a better product, the industry will be on the right track. Until then, things may get ugly (literally and figuratively). "It has to be a cultural change to accept a different aesthetic. 'Brown is good' is not translating to the TV and what the professional golfers do. Everyone follows the Jones," warned Forse.

But Jaime Diaz thinks that the brown movement may be accepted by the world's top golfers quicker than we all may think. Could it be that the pro tours can benefit from fast and firm

conditions? After all these years, could it be that the professional never embraced wet and green conditions?

“Talking to them [the professionals], they like it. There is more skill involved and their eye can develop the kind of contact that will hold those greens and get the ball closer to the pins than a guy with less skill. It is a separator,” he pointed out. According to Jaime, this is where the men are separated from the boys. “I think to make it brown on a more consistent level, Jack Nicklaus would have said ‘I like it’ and Tiger Woods says he likes it,” shared Diaz.

The general attitude to conditioning in the United States can often be described as ‘perfect conditions’ whereas conditioning in the British Isles can be characterized as ‘a fair test’. That difference is one reason why golf has traditionally been more affordable in the British Isles. In addition to the brown movement, minimizing perfection on the maintenance side has many additional financial benefits for the golf industry here in the United States.

Promoting imperfect playing fields allows for a range of acceptable conditions without such a magnifying glass on the operation. If the lines are blurry, scrutiny cannot be had so easily. A more manicured state opens us up for instant criticism if something seems out of place. There is more room for error and less cost as a result. The imperfect approach can bring nature closer to the game and allow facilities to shine a light on environmental benefits gained from such an approach. When the fairways are a bit harder and the reason is environmentally-driven, it is a positive. Golfers will have a hard time fighting that.

A major element of high maintenance in the United States is our approach to hazards. Somewhere along the way, we as golfers - and an industry reliant on golfers - have forgotten the definition of a hazard. In particular, a sand bunker edge is as well defined as the edge of the door to the pro shop.

The harsh reality is that a sand bunker is an unnatural occurrence within the confines of a manicured golf course. Ironically it was born out of erosion, which absolutely flies in the face of conventional wisdom regarding the amount of conditioning we apply to sand today. “A bunker should be a hazard. If it is so perfectly maintained then it ceases to be effective” shared Ran Morrissett. “We play a neutered down version of the game today!”

We must return all hazards to their actual status as hazards instead of ‘alternate surfaces’. Attendee Jim Lewis offered up his own reminder, “Let’s promote the ‘That is why they call it hazards, stupid’ philosophy.” If that happens, maintenance budgets can re-direct bunker maintenance funds to other areas of the golf course or simply reduce costs.

Ron Forse pointed out that superintendents actually spend more money per square foot on bunkers than greens. “What we do now is more of Japanese gardening more than it is bunker maintenance” said Forse. He pointed to a project of his where the maintenance crew cut back on raking every day and not one member complained. By raking bunkers just one day a week, thousands of labor hours can be saved. Why not eliminate rakes altogether. Only at that point will sand bunkers return to their intended purpose. Think of the money that could be saved as well.

Greg Lyman feels the simple way to call attention to the over-inflated maintenance attitude is to create what he calls an 'energy metric' to determine a per-acre cost of maintenance. The intention would be to "flatten things out today pretty quickly by comparing the cost per acre of golf courses related to expectations," according to Lyman. In conclusion, Greg thinks this strategy will challenge expectations of golfers to create a reasonable balance between the marketplace and sustainability.

- **Stop using grassing to achieve aesthetics.**

Repeatedly over the past few decades there has been a remarkable focus on the number of grass types that proliferate on golf courses in the name of design. Each grass type specified on a site comes with its own chemical and cultural requirements, adding cost to the operation. An increase in costs can also apply when discussing the varying mowing heights of golf course features.

There are lessons to be learned from the golden age layouts that can reduce maintenance costs *and* make the game more enjoyable and less time-consuming. Number one is that Donald Ross and his contemporaries never relied on textural contrast of grasses to make a point on the golf course. The focus was on strategy, not aesthetics.

Also, short grass is a great equalizing tool that golf course architects of the golden age recognized in two ways: First, it affords numerous short game options around the greens for golfers of different skill levels. Good players are more afraid of the short grass, but they are the friend of the golfer trying to get around in ninety, so the more short grass on the golf course, the better.

Secondly, short grass allows for fairway areas to funnel golf balls toward sand hazards, making those hazards seem larger. By utilizing this technique, one can develop a 'larger' hazard for the price of a smaller hazard. This design technique was disregarded over time as drainage concerns discouraged surface runoff from entering sand bunkers. That, of course, evolved out of the rising desire for 'better' conditions.

Simplifying mowing practices can also lead to an improvement of the bottom line. Golden age courses typically had no more than three mowing heights (tees and fairways, greens, everything else). Often times there were only two mowing heights and the rough was simply ignored. Wherever single row irrigation fell, grass tended to grow as fairway and that was it.

Wild Horse Golf Club is one modern course that has seen the benefits of minimizing grassing efforts to keep golf affordable. Seventy acres are maintained at 1/2 inch height with just triplex mowing and 7-gang mowers. All rough areas are left in a natural state. There are no extras on the golf course. No trees, no flowerbeds. In the end, Wild Horse focuses its resources strictly on the playing areas (tees, greens, fairways) and nothing else.

Generally speaking, Symposium attendees agreed that over-seeding was an excessive cost but understood that whatever clubs want to spend money for over-seeding should be free to do

so. But over-seeding should not be a universal necessity at all golf courses due to its expense. Over-seeding is another aesthetic issue which negatively affects playability and enjoyment of the game. The average golfer would greatly benefit from the spongy lie provided by dormant Bermuda grass as well as the extra distance one gets from playing on relatively dry surfaces when not over-seeded. Superintendents can greatly reduce irrigation, chemical, and labor inputs by eliminating the practice and return money to the bottom line.

- **Eliminate the frills and extravagances.**

Successful golf clubs, whether old or new, never bought into the extras that corporate ‘industry experts’ have been touting over the past few decades. Granted, many of these extras are insisted upon in a country club setting. But those same amenities are not what the golfer seeks out when looking to tee the ball up. That distinction is important to make when determining what facilities would improve their bottom line by eliminating frills. Nonetheless, most golfers would benefit more by affordable golf than warm towels or a GPS system in their golf carts.

Two facilities that have eliminated the frills in exchange for affordable golf are North Berwick Golf Club and Wild Horse Golf Club. There are no food and beverage expectations at North Berwick – no halfway house, no beverage carts. Although the clubhouse has catering, that is run by a separate entity that does not cloud the club’s ledger.

Doing without the extras that most modern facilities have deemed “irreplaceable”, the folks at Wild Horse have proven that pure golf architecture and sensible day to day operations can rank Wild Horse among the best courses in the country. According to General Manager Don Graham, operations are simply run. “From a clubhouse standpoint, we don’t have a lot of frills. We try to give people good service, a friendly smile when they walk in, ‘how are you’, etc. No bottles of water in golf carts and not a lot of stuff to drive up labor” he said.

- **Keep labor down.**

By eliminating frills and extravagances, a club can realize labor savings as well. Yet labor can be reduced from the onset of a project with the right design and operations approach. “Because it is centrally located, I can see every hole from the clubhouse” maintains Graham, “I can maintain pace of play from the clubhouse which keeps labor down. Wild Horse also does not have a chef. Instead the pro shop handles a modest snack bar.

There are only four year-round employees at Wild Horse. Two are hourly and the other two, Graham and Josh Mahar, are salaried. The rest of the staff is seasonal. Josh targets four main costs in maintenance: labor, water, chemicals and fertilizer, and equipment. In his department just Josh and one other are full time employees. Three or four come on board in the shoulder season and four more are employed in peak seasons. There is limited middle management.

One common thread was the idea that too much middle management (whether within an organization or within a particular operation) seems to be a costly concern. For example,

some municipal golf courses are run not only by the municipality, but are also outsourced to a management company that turns around and uses locals for day to day operations. Trevor Smith wondered if the cost of a golf operation was the issue or the management of those costs were the issue when it comes to affordable golf. “Are we looking at the right places in golf to reduce costs and create affordability? Instead we always look at the largest expenses,” queried Smith.

One way to reduce labor is to ensure what labor is employed can multi-task. That includes understanding how all aspects of the operation work. General Manager Gene Fleming of Herndon Centennial Golf Course believes in consistent strategic planning of his facility, “by doing that I involve all aspects of my operation: Maintenance, volunteers, outside staff. We do at least a five-year strategic plan. We come back each year to review. Where are we at now, where do we want to go, and how are we going to get there? We get everyone on the same page,” said Fleming.

He has created his own system of planning called SWOT Analysis: (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). The threats he considers are quality of competition, aggressive discounting, economic downturn, and weather. Similar to Wild Horse, Herndon Centennial (west of Washington D.C.) keeps full-time employees to a minimum. To compensate, all individuals are emphasized to cross-train. He also supplements with volunteers and outsourcing. “We use volunteers for filling divots and fixing ball marks. Eagle Scouts do landscaping and other organizations such as the Virginia Bluebird Society help with things.”

In addition to outsourcing aerification, custodial services, and the snack bar, there is an ongoing commitment to equipment maintenance which translates into a 25% increase in life expectancy. The five full-time maintenance employees are trained in IPM. They first scout the golf course instead of just wholesale uniform spraying. When they do spray, it is logged in detail.

Many of the above management strategies are tried and true methods of operation in all businesses, yet there are facilities that can learn a lesson that doing without can go a long way in being financial viable. Wild Horse and Herndon are great examples that are surrounded by facilities that haven’t fared as well in the recent past.

- **Focus less on profit and more on growing the game.**

Greed in society has run rampant since the days of Adam and Eve and no attendee or participant at the Symposium really wants to create a socialist business model. In fact, we all acknowledged it was important that the golf business turns a profit in order to be successful and help grow the game. At the same time, it seemed for many people in attendance that the goal of many facilities was to make money first before growing the game. Residential golf course developers consistently made money selling home sites at the very sacrifice of the game. Many in the golf industry jumped on that gravy train and did not look back.

There was a recent thread on GolfClubAtlas.com asking if the golf architect’s duty to grow the game conflicted with the ability to make a living. It takes a delicate hand to balance that

equation. While we are on the subject of golf architects, it was noted that golf course design fees have become an un-proportional percentage of the overall cost of a project. Seven-figure fees are way out of line if the goal is to promote the game of golf.

One clear observation to everyone in attendance was that way too many people got into the business of golf as a means of profit without having the love of the game first. Outsiders put a corporate spin on the *business* for profit yet did not understand what made the *game* attractive to the golfer. The game suffered and is less affordable as a result. Ran Morrisett pointed out numerous times that golf wasn't invented for the sake of people to make a lot of money out of it. Attendee Kris Shreiner made the observation that the game doesn't owe the industry a profit center based on unrealistic or unsustainable expectations.

Symposium case study Wild Horse is an excellent example of a project built by the community - and for the community - more than anything else. Don Graham stressed the Wild Horse story isn't for those interested in making a large profit. "From day one, ownership has been more interested in keeping the golf course affordable for the local people than it is in turning a high profit," stated Graham. "Now, do we turn a profit? Yes we do and if we wanted to make more money, we'd obviously raise our fees."

Because of Wild Horse's dedication to the local community, the community responded with 4,500 hours of labor donated to construction of both the golf course and the clubhouse. Local farmers stopped by the project on the way home from work each day to assist in disking up the land or other tasks. A crane was even donated for a day.

- **Subsidize 'local play' with 'outside play'**

One item of note which struck a very sensible chord was the concept of making the game more affordable for some may just be in the hands of others who are willing to pay a little more. This is not a situation based purely on economic class, but more on access to a particular facility. This concept has been around a long time as municipal golf courses have provided discounts to residents, semi-private golf courses allow outside play as a profit center, and some resort clubs allow members to play at reasonable rates. Pinehurst Country Club is a great example of this as retirees and locals have access to seven golf courses provided they share tee times with resort golfers who provide a substantial amount of the necessary operating budget each year.

This model of tourist golf subsidizing local golf is a staple of member clubs in the British Isles. Visitor play and income is critical to each club's financial liability throughout Scotland. At North Berwick Golf Club in particular, 11,000 tourist rounds annually supplement the 33,000 member rounds annually. Simply put, 25% that is not affordable allows the other 75% to be affordable. A similar story is true for Wild Horse, where 9,000 guest fee rounds annually help support the other 15,000 rounds played by 210 members. At the municipally-run Herndon Centennial, there are lower greens fees for Town residents compared to outside rounds (a typical practice of municipal golf).

## *Goals to Improve the Game for All*

- **A quality experience can bring enjoyment to the game at any price point**

Jaime Diaz referred to a “certain serendipity”; Attendee Bill Dow called it the “thrill of the game”; Ron Forse called for “uncluttered fun”. Whatever the perspective, the bottom line at the Symposium on Affordable Golf was that in order for the business to succeed, there must be enjoyment of the game. Cost to play, time to complete a round, difficulty of the playing fields, and environmental challenges, are all primary detriments to enjoyment of the game. With the correct focus on enjoyment more than using golf as a means for profit – directly or indirectly – the business may improve and yield more success (monetarily and otherwise).

Bill Yates sees many problems solved by improving the quality of the experience at any price point. When asked what poor quality might seem like, Yates pointed to pace of play as just a symptom of problematic variables which management can control and additional problematic variables players can control. A poor quality experience happens when one is not in control of those variables. While pace of play starts out properly, uncontrolled variables slow rounds down to the point that people stop playing at a certain point in the day because of time reputation and the customer loses a consistent product. The early product is better than the later product and because it costs the same, quality suffers.

The goal is to reduce inconsistency so no matter what price point a facility is in, it can still deliver a quality product. Price has nothing to do with whether one is managing a golf course properly or not. Yates has developed five major areas of concern that impact the pace of play:

- **Golf Course Design:** A focus on aesthetics over strategy can create slow play issues because of the number of hazards needed to make a design statement. Residential golf course design is a double-whammy because numerous forced carries are a typical characteristic of those facilities as well as long distances between golf holes. Blind holes, early holes that play directly into the rising sun, late holes that play directly into the setting sun, and short par-fives, drivable par-fours, and par-threes that come too early in a round are all design factors when considering pace of play.
- **Golf course maintenance and setup:** Excessive rough, narrow fairways, and un-puttable greens are golf course management factors that affect pace of play. Yates offers up the 180 yard rule for superintendents to evaluate course difficulty for the average customer. He implores them to observe what the golfer may encounter at those distances along each hole and minimize challenges there such as high rough.

He also advises management that instead of looking at what makes a backed-up hole too hard, one should look at the previous hole and see why that hole may be too easy. But be careful not to make golf course easier in order to speed up play. That can create golfers who try to hit through doglegs, drive greens, etc. and can be counter-productive.

- **Management practices and policies** (separate from what players do): Management must understand how to load a golf course properly, know how quickly courses can absorb players, and know how long it should take to play each hole. With that knowledge in place, a management team has the ability to know where each group should be on the course and predict where slow play happens.

Golf courses can request a USGA Pace Rating from their Regional Golf Association based on the same data used for building the USGA course handicap rating. This custom rating process establishes a target completion time for each hole on a golf course. Once a club has that information, proper starting intervals can be developed to maintain a consistent quality experience.

- **Player Behavior** (how players act on the golf course): When a golf course is loaded properly based on the above management practices and policies, management will recognize slow players immediately. Without that data, the impression is that everyone is slow with no remediation. “This is what causes rangers to look like they have no ability to move play along,” noted Yates.
- **Player Ability** (where players end up on the golf course): Getting the players to the right tee is vital to maintain pace of play and goes a long way to managing forced carries.

By utilizing any way management can help players be more successful or have more fun, a facility will be successful. When one can provide consistent quality rounds, player retention will result. From there, Yates is confident loyalty, replay and more value will follow.

- **Change traditional attitudes and eliminate negative stereotypes**

If the game’s industry was willing (or allowed) to be more flexible and loosen the rigidity of traditional golf business practices, the game can certainly be enjoyed by more people. Initiatives to bring golfers into the game at any age are great, but there are some things golf’s primary associations can continue do that take a lot less effort yet probably can be quite effective. For instance, let’s promote walking more. Not just for better health, but for a better experience. Are carts bad for the game? Not when they provide access to the game for those who need it, but when carts become a profit center, then it becomes a problem.

Maybe the leaders of golf can help lift the negative stereotype of pull carts while they are at it. Attendee Jim Lewis singled out the negative attitude toward pull carts in the south yet that attitude prevails in the other three corners of America also. Alan Chainey feels pull carts help with the rhythm of play much like walking does (and golf carts do not). He also noted that British Amateur contestants can use pull carts during the event. Can you imagine a golfer in the U. S. Amateur doing that? Can you imagine the USGA allowing that?

If management was willing to abandon a traditional business model and outlook on the way the game should be played in order to allow tee sheets to be filled, then more golfers would



not only come to the game, but also feel less intimidated by the game and its traditions. For instance, over the past ten years at North Berwick, mats are used off the tee and fairways in the six to eight weeks prior to Christmas. Another idea is to give tee times away to newcomers or juniors just to promote golf.

If golfers were willing to lower expectations and demands, then maybe they can reap the rewards of affordability and a consistent, quality golf experience. Again Chainey leans on the courses of Scotland for inspiration. “Clubs acknowledge how important visitor play is and members work with that regarding tee times. If we can be more flexible with planning then we can ensure the course is fully engaged without major maintenance” he said.

One stereotype which has always perplexed me is the rigidity of a par 72 golf course nowadays. It increases costs on many levels. Anything less and the developer looking to maximize profits somehow sees a negative. For all golfers, playing a par 71 or 70 course just gets them closer to breaking 100, 90, 80, or 70. There was actually a time not so long in our past when par did not exist back when maximizing the land in the design process and not forcing stereotypical hole distances and pars on the ground was the norm.

Deep rough, perfect conditioning, and excessive green speeds have slowly become an accepted part of the American game, yet were not part of what brought golfers to the game in the first place.

We are also a society that loves numbers and ways to classify things. Stimpmeter readings have become a source of pride for many clubs as much as it is a source of consternation for golf course superintendents. They are forced to maintain greens to the point of their own job’s extinction just because a member wants greens like at Augusta National or Oakmont. Part of the problem is the promotion of these readings by television announcers.

Crystal Downs Country Club in Frankfort, Michigan (an Alister Mackenzie golden age classic) undertook a study of their green speeds specifically to see how much enjoyment is actually derived from faster putting surfaces. They used the information to eliminate stimpmeter reading announcements and replace them with an acceptable range of green speed that isn’t announced publicly on a daily basis. Instead, they have a sign on the first tee saying “the range for the ideal green speed has been set for this course. Today you are playing at, below, or above that range.” They have set a target speed and managed to it in a specific effort to promote the enjoyment of the game of golf.

### ***A Few Symposium Trends***

Throughout the day’s presentations and discussions a few thoughts repeatedly were mentioned that bear some discussion.

- **The Old Course at St. Andrews as a model.**

Whether the discussion was affordable golf, golden age design trends, pace of play, or management of golf courses in the British Isles, The Old Course at St. Andrews consistently

was mentioned as a viable model for a variety of endeavors. Even after all these years, the true home of golf still has many lessons to teach the rest of the world. Ran Morrisett lamented why the game (not just an industry) strayed so far from the Old Course when it comes to design. “It are many central hazards yet there are very few central hazards being built in the modern game. It all goes back to studying the Old Course” Ran said.

From a pace of play standpoint, Bill Yates made the observation that the Old Course is the perfect course because it was played, not designed. “The playing of the game at the Old Course resulted in the design of the Old Course. Why did they get rid of four holes to start? They turned them into two long holes because it felt better to play, said Yates. “The Old Course is a perfectly flowing golf course.” In other words, the Old Course evolved as the game evolved yet it is still relevant and successful today. There must be something there for the rest of us to learn.

- **Communication will cure many woes.**

The Symposium on Affordable Golf was a gathering spot for industry people and golfers alike to communicate their ideas and concerns about the game and the industry. Throughout the day’s discussions, it was evident that communicating new ideas *and* old concepts is vital to changing thought processes and attitudes regarding affordable golf.

First and foremost, customer interaction is the most overlooked communication issue today. There is great info to be gained from people. What do they want, what are they willing to pay, etc. Industry leaders need to talk with the golfer about what they want, what are their attitudes toward strategy, aesthetics, maintenance, the environment, what is fair and what is not fair regarding the game, etc.

One other idea regarding customer interaction was the more we get to know customers on a first-name basis the more we may build loyalty. Loyalty will help when times get tough and difficult financial decisions need to be made. Who knows? Customers may be so satisfied with that personal touch that they may be willing to cooperate with less frills and extras, reducing expenses and lowering costs for themselves in the process.

Environmental communication is vital if the industry wants to eliminate the poor public relationship the golf industry has with naysayers. Greg Lyman stressed that we “teach the golfer that these land spaces are good for the long-term health of the community, the water, environment, the watersheds, and ecosystem. [We must] turn them into advocates.” Kevin Fletcher reiterated that the toughest step in the Audubon program is also the most important: Outreach and education and according to Lyman, “ We still don’t yet know the golfer’s attitudes on connecting the environmental attributes of the sport they are passionate about and the places they like to play. Then we can determine the value of that.”

“There are things that are successful no matter what niche we are in. The degree that which we can share info and learn those things will help everybody from the players to the industry” is a great summary on the topic of communication by Ran Morrisett.

- **Family participation.**

One discussion point which was a common thread throughout the day was the realization that the golf industry is not only recovering from a recession, but it also must react to a major cultural shift from tradition by transforming the game from a male-dominated individual sport to a family sport.

Family golf can be a long-term solution where it was once acceptable for the man to play golf regularly on the weekends. Not only will more people come to the game, but it will also re-introduce golf to the men who were forced to give up the game because of family commitments. In addition, females play an increasing role in family budgeting and often control reductions in available funds for discretionary spending. Golf needs women to openly embrace family golf, particularly in the face of an ever-widening range of leisure activities.

Many facilities have already shifted in this direction but it needs golf's associations to embrace family golf in a more public effort, magazines to sell family golf vacations, and operators to promote family opportunities. "Where are the courses for the normal guy who can bring his children out there to play, have just a decent time and not get too beat up?" asked Morrisett, "You need the magazines to say 'Hey this is really nice. This is really fun'." Attendee Nick Green feels that new technology [such as social media] can communicate this game in effective ways to young people and their families. "You've got to get the families playing golf and communicate effectively the joys of the game," stressed Green.

## **Final Thoughts**

It must be duly noted that the report provided above is not intended to be the definitive word on affordable golf. There are many other topics and concerns that were not addressed and numerous voices which were not heard at the Symposium yet still need to be highlighted.

This first Symposium on Affordable Golf is just a small step in a grass roots movement that is not intended to take shots at the golf industry organizations, blaming them or anyone else on why the expense of the game has gotten out of hand. They all are well aware of the issues that face the future of golf and are positively doing what they see fit. Yet in addition to those avenues we must also attack this issue one person at a time and one step at a time. We must individually take incremental steps toward making the game more affordable.

Each one of us should educate each other about different standards and conditions regarding not just design and conditioning, but operations as well. A less is more philosophy can accomplish many things toward affordability. Part of this effort requires that everyone across the board make sacrifices if we want the game to survive and thrive. Architects could lower fees, golfers could accept lesser conditions, and operators could accept less profit. We need to work from a collaborative standpoint in order to strengthen the game and therefore strengthen the industry.

No one who attended the Symposium expected to solve these problems in one day, but it was a starting point that now needs to be built upon. The charge to those seventy-five attendees is to

spread the word about what was discussed and vow to double attendance next year. Our goal is to continue these efforts and hope that others join us to make golf a more affordable game and economically sustainable business.

Respectfully submitted,  
Richard Mandell (December 22, 2010)

**2<sup>nd</sup> Symposium on Affordable Golf: November 7-8, 2011 in Southern Pines, North Carolina.**