

D. A. Pierce, June 10, 2021

On Friday, June 4, 2021, Chris Hartwiger and Dave Pierce of the USGA's Green Section visited Five Island Golf, a 9-hole municipal golf course in Emmetsburg, Iowa. Chris was quite familiar with the course and Dave played the course the previous evening.

Here are some background notes about the course:

- Membership for family of two is \$380 per year.
- Green fees are about \$20, and the cart fee is \$15 for a round.
- No tee times, no dress code, and it is ok to skip holes or start on any hole.
- Private carts are allowed; however, there is a fee to store a cart on the property.

Starting roughly five years ago, the introduction of more forward tees began. It has been fully formalized on the course and scorecard as yellow tees measuring 2002 yards for 9 holes or 4004 yards for an 18-hole equivalent. Front and back images of the scorecard are in the Appendix for reference.

Prior to the introduction of the yellow tees, red and white tees were the only options and were offered at 2524 yards for 9 holes / 5048 yards for 18 holes and 2695 yards for 9 holes / 5390 yards for 18 holes respectively.

The primary goal of the visit was to interview the implementer and users of the new yellow forward tee to develop a case study for other facilities.

Prior to the focus group, a discussion with the course Superintendent occurred. The current superintendent has been on staff for 9 – 10 years and had no prior experience in the golf or turfgrass industry. Here are the notes from that conversation:

- Only 1 full time employee (Super [former teach/principal]) + 1 part time worker
- Season starts when weather improves (normally in April)
- About 40 acres of grass
- Fairways are mowed three times per week
- Greens are mowed every day
- Rough is mowed as time is available
- Trim around 300 trees ~three to four times per year
- Spring & Fall clean-up with chopping mower
- Mowers maintained in the fall – blades sharpened once per year
- Irrigation was installed in the 90s
 - Water every night
 - Greens: 10 min cycle + hand water in the morning
 - Fairways: 8 min cycle
 - Need to check heads as some are not functioning properly

- Discussed the challenge to hire additional help
- History of yellow tees
 - The color selected for forward tee markers was selected because yellow tee markers were already available.
 - Started with small areas of mowed rough & irrigation flags in the ground.
 - As use started to increase, we built twelve inch high tees with topsoil / fairway grass – mowed to fairway height. They were seeded four times (irrigation trouble) with low-mow Kentucky Blue Grass.
 - Each Fall, sand is added to keep the new tees level.
 - Use of the new yellow tee spread by word of mouth. This led to some confusion on who the tees were for. Many call them senior tees. Management needed a communication plan when they were installed.
 - The men’s league allowed play from the yellow tees. Initially the handicaps were incorrectly applied, but then an adjustment was made.
 - There was discussion of building equivalent quality of tee boxes, but maintenance cost would have increased.
 - The new tees “Helps keep golfers score where the players like to see them...”
 - Mostly used by older golfers – kids start on regular tees.
 - Condition of the yellow tees is better than the white tees, even the par 3 tees.
 - Only complaint about the yellow tees is the soil is so hard it’s difficult to put a tee in the ground.

Here is some demographic information about the ten golfers in the focus group:

Frequency of play:

Avid (>19 rds/yr) = 6 golfers

Core (8-19 rds / yr) = 4 golfers

Casual (<8 rds/yr) = 0 golfers

Tenure (how long have you been playing golf?):

>15 yrs = 9 golfers

5-15 yrs = 1 golfers

<5 yrs = 0 golfers

Handicap Index™:

0 - 9 = 1 golfers

10 - 24 = 6 golfers

25+ = 3 golfers

The focus group conversation was recorded with audio only. Here are some of the important notes and observations from the focus group:

Q1) How was golf before yellow tees versus now with yellow tees?

- I am scoring better and “more normal”
- For me (shorter hitter) – the holes looked very long – “I’ll never get there”
- The yellow tees are an option – no one has to play them

- They are more fun
- I save 5 – 7 strokes per 9 holes
- Many wouldn't play any longer – it keeps them in the game
- Keeps us competitive as we get older
- Competitions allow use of forward tees for 75 yrs or older

Q2) How did the transition go to yellow tees?

- No guilt
- Too much fun to worry about it
- One player stayed back until the end of the season, and then she transitioned up
- Liked using different clubs into greens
- Greens hard to hit (small with roll offs) and hold without a scoring club in hand, so having a shorter approach shot helps

3) Observation of other's habits:

- Consensus that most are playing from appropriate tees
- Only Emmetsburg has ~4000 yard, 18-hole tees. All the other courses in the area are longer

4) How important is pace of play?

- Yellow tees have helped pace of play
- Worse to hold up someone else – then I feel rushed

5) How could Five Island be improved?

- No suggestions – they feel the course is fun to play
- There was no desire to make the course more difficult to combat increases in distance.
- One golfer who played for 75 years and won club championships in the 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s and 00s loved the course and didn't think it's relatively short length from the white tees took away from his enjoyment over the years

6) Will even more forward tees be needed in the future?

- No, the yellow tees are short enough
- Challenge will not be enough at that point

Appendix

Here are images of the front and back of the scorecard:

HOLES	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	OUT
Yardage - Men	340	148	363	415	405	140	428	154	302	2695
Yardage - Women	303	132	350	405	395	130	395	140	274	2524
Flow Box	254	110	243	351	264	97	340	125	218	2002
Handicap	5	17	3	11	1	15	7	13	9	
Men's Par	4	3	4	5	4	3	5	3	4	35
Women's Par	4	3	4	5	5	3	5	3	4	36
Flow Box Par	4	3	4	5	5	3	5	3	4	36

DATE _____

Five Island Golf

Ground Rules

1. U.S.G.A. rules govern all play unless modified by local rules.
2. All players must register at the Pro Shop and non-members must have a current green fee tag visible.
3. Out-of-Bounds: Road on 1, 2, and 3; white posts/markers on 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9; white stakes and post along park drive; chain behind green on 9.
4. Out-of-Bounds Penalty: Loss of distance and stroke (two strokes).
5. Water Hazard: Marked by yellow stakes. Drop anywhere on the line of flight, up to front edge of the pond; not a lateral drop.
6. Please replace turf and repair ball marks.
7. Beverages Policy: All beverages consumed on the golf course or in the club house must be purchased from the Golf Club.
8. Not more than foursomes allowed. Slow players and players hunting for lost balls should signal players to play through.

PLEASE OBSERVE RULES OF ETIQUETTE

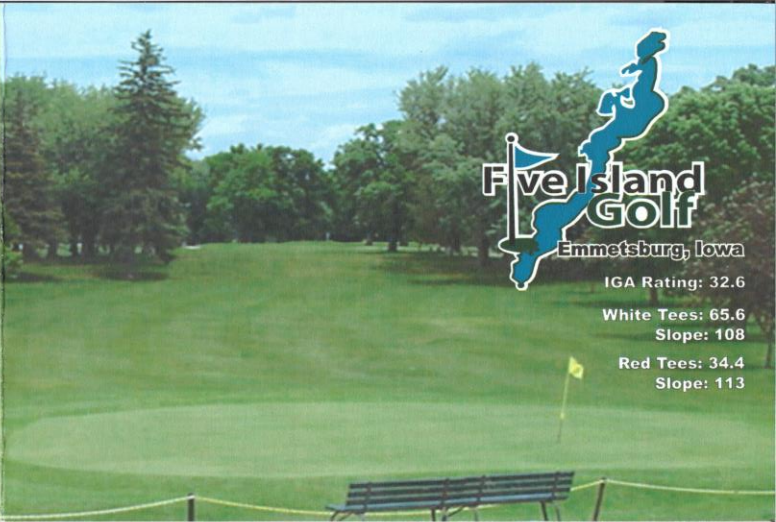
Golf car drivers: Please observe signs around tee and greens.

90° rule is enforced. Operate cart in rough until parallel to ball; turn cart 90° to ball; return directly to rough and proceed to next lie.

Yardage measured from center of tee to center of green.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	IN	TOT	HCP	NET
48	363	415	405	140	428	154	302	2695	5390												
32	350	405	395	130	395	140	274	2524	5048												
10	243	351	264	97	340	125	218	2002	4004												
8	4	12	2	16	8	14	10														
3	4	5	4	3	5	3	4	35	70												
3	4	5	5	3	5	3	4	36	72												
3	4	5	5	3	5	3	4	36	72												

CORER _____
TTEST _____



The discussion guide designed for the discussion follows. Black text indicates items planned and discussed during the focus group. Red text indicates items planned, but not discussed during the focus group. Blue text indicates the notes made during the discussion.

Distance Insights GX Focus Group Discussion Guide

Interviewers: [Pierce & Hartwiger](#)

Sources of Focus Group Respondents: [Players at Five Island Lake Golf Course, Emmetsburg, Iowa](#)

Facility type: [Public / Municipal](#)

Genders: Male = 6; Female = 4

Region: [Midwest](#)

Frequency of play:

Avid (>19 rds/yr) = 6

Core (8-19 rds / yr) = 4

Casual (<8 rds/yr) = 0

Tenure (how long have you been playing golf?):

>15 yrs = 9

5-15 yrs = 1

<5 yrs = 0

Handicap Index™:

0 – 9 = 1

10-24 = 6

25+ = 3

Date of visit: [6/4/21](#)

Introduction

- Thank you for your participation today.
- My name is [__DAP__](#) and we are looking to better understand the place that golf holds in your life, and certain aspects behind what drives your relationship with the game.
- I work for the USGA as a researcher with no vested interest in any product or service, but I am more interested in understanding your attitudes and opinions.
- **There are no right or wrong answers, so I only ask that you be open and honest in this discussion. Nothing you say will offend or otherwise upset me.**
- Golf is a big part of my life.
 - It's helpful because I care about what you say and how it will relate to the other interviews that we are conducting for this project.
 - It could be confusing to you, because for the purposes of this conversation, I will largely ignore my own knowledge of golf, and may ask things in ways that make it sound like I've never played; because my preconceptions aren't important.
- I am taking notes and we are also recording our discussion so that I have a record to refer back to when I am writing my report. The recording is not for public release, just for internal analysis and reporting.
- This research is confidential in that your responses will be used only in the aggregate and your name or will not be associated with anything you say.
- I provided DI overview

Golf in Context

1. To start with I want to begin with an understanding of where golf fits in your overall set of

leisure time priorities?

- How many of you would say golf is the most important recreational activity you do?
_____ of _____all
 - What (if anything) do you like to do more than play golf?
 - N/A
 - Why do you say that? N/A
- What does golf offer you that other activities do not?
 - Being outside
 - Social
 - Competition – winning small bets
 - For context, all of the men in the group played in the “league” for many years. It combined all three of the above characteristics.
- How many of you play as much as you like? _____

2. If I had fallen down from outer space and had never experienced the game of golf, how would you describe it to me? [LISTEN AND PROBE FOR EXPERIENTIAL ELEMENTS, CHALLENGE VS. SOCIABILITY/FUN]

3. Describe for me, the type of person for whom golf is their absolute favorite activity.

- Are they athletic? Any distinguishing physical characteristics?
 - Like to be with other people
 - Family oriented
 - Not overly athletic
 - Grandkids like driving the golf cart before playing
- Where does this person play golf---What type of golf course [PROBE for private vs. public; # of holes they typically play; How challenging is the course? What makes it challenging (LISTEN FOR DISTANCE) Do they play at different types of courses? Why or why not?
- What drives this person to the game relative to other leisure activities? How does that compare to your motivations for playing?

4. Is golf more about competition or casual enjoyment? Why do you say that?

- Almost all play mostly for social reasons first, but like to compete
 - How difficult should golf be?
 - Why?
- Difficulty depends on the day
- There are peaks and valleys
- How hard should golf be compared to par?
 - Par should be a goal – should be possible, but not so easy that you achieve it quickly
 - Par on one or two holes is enough for some
 - It should be achievable even if you don't achieve it

The Golf Experience—Distance and Course Set-up

5. There is a saying in golf that it's often one shot or one great hole that brings you back. Tell me about the most memorable hole of golf that you ever played. Set it up, like you are telling me a story.

- Where were you?
- Who were you with?
- Describe the golf hole [LISTEN FOR Yardages, which set of tees you were hitting from]
- [PROBE AS NEEDED What did you do? Clubs used, etc., Listen for role of distances]
- Why was this most memorable?
- [IF THIS WAS AN ACE—ASK About something that was next most memorable that wasn't an H-I-O And go through same thing]

6. What's more important to you, hitting it far or hitting it accurately? Why do you say that?

Rough height of cut – need to be able to find our ball
Don't need long rough because we have plenty of trees

7. Is the typical hole one that you can reach in the green to have a birdie putt or a chance to get up and down for a par, or is it too long?

- How often should all golfers be able to reach the green in regulation? Most of the time, but could be difficult to have all golfers achieve this – so many different ability levels. Why or why not?
- What do you feel should be the maximum length of a par four from the set of tees you would most normally play? Should recreational golfer have opportunities to make birdies and eagles during each round? Yes, regularly but not necessarily on every hole

8. Here are two scenarios, what would be more satisfying?

Par 3 discussion – should I be able to reach GIR?

- “if you can't reach a par 3 with your tee shot, you can't make a hole in one”
 - There is a variety in golfer abilities
 - Of the 3 par threes, how many should be reachable?
 - If 100 – 120 yds, most should be able to reach most of the holes (GIR)
 - Challenge is part of the joy – beating your handicap is fun, but only if a challenge
-
- Parring the short but tricky par four over the pond with driver wedge to a small, undulating/tiered green
 - Parring a long par 4 that you can't reach with your best drive and best approach shot but getting up and down from in front of the green?
 - Why?
 - Prefer to hit GIR & have a birdie chance
 - If made bogey, which bogey is worse?
 - Three-putt case is more annoying – three-putts are memorable

9. Tell me about the course set-up where you typically play.

- Which tees do you usually play from? How do you decide? Why? [PROBE FOR INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL TEE COLORS AND WHAT THEY SIGNIFY—DO

THEY SIGNIFY ANYTHING IN PARTICULAR?]

- How often do you vary the tee boxes that you play from? Why or why not?
- Have you ever played from a different set of tees than others in your group? Why or why not? How do you reflect on that experience?
- Have you ever played from combo tees? What are your thoughts on such a concept? When might it be best to use this, if at all?
- What was it like to play here before the new forward tees were added?
 - Has this made a significant difference for you?
 - Has it made a significant difference for some of the people you play with?
 - Are you happy with the additions?
 - Are they short enough?

10. Tell me why you choose to play at the course you most frequently play at?

- Beyond convenience factors (who you play with, proximity), are there other aspects of the experience that makes this course stand out either positively or negatively? What are they?
- Are you happy there, or would you prefer something different? What would be the one thing that would make this experience better? Why?
- Does a course need to be a minimum length for you to consider playing it?
- Do other golfers you play with play appropriate length tees?" Why or why not? "do you mind if a golfer in your group plays a different set of tees from your preference?

11. Tell me about the most difficult golf course you've ever played. What made it difficult?

- How should the course be designed, set-up and maintained to provide an appropriate challenge? (to provide a variety of shot types needed for success)
- Does a course need to have rough or penalty areas?

12. I'm going to go through a list of factors that can impact your overall experience. For each, tell me if these factors are critically important to your enjoyment, somewhat important, somewhat unimportant or totally unimportant: [REVIEW LIST AND PROBE THE WHYs FOR THOSE ON EITHER EXTREME]:

- Pace of play
- Exercise
- Convenience of location
- Amenable to all skill levels
- Too easy for good players / Too difficult for less skilled players
- Number of available tees
- Bunkering
- Water hazards
- Undulation
- Green complexity
- Overall course condition and maintenance

13. To wrap up, please take a moment and describe for me, your vision for the perfect golf course...one that you would enjoy playing on a regular basis [PROBE FOR DISTANCE, PAR AND OTHER ASPECTS OF COURSE SET-UP]