

Phraseology 101

By: Nathan Grace Date: April 22, 2006

A few years ago, I received a fax from a friend with an interesting exercise typed on it. You were to pick any three digit number between 000 and 999, then using the chart on the page, derive a new “buzz phrase” you could use in any setting to make people think you knew more than you did. There were three columns with ten different words in each column assigned numbers 0 through 9, so that the possibilities were endless (well, mathematically speaking, up to 1,000 permutations anyway). For example, the number 069 would be “integrated transitional contingency.” The thinking behind the idea is that all businesses and industries are full of people who are, to borrow a phrase from the late Jerry Clower, educated beyond their intelligence and others around them who don’t want anyone else to realize that they are not as educated as they want others to think they may be. In fact, I grew tired of faxing the page to friends and family members after telling them the story, so I created a web site (buzzphrase.org) where I created the same exercise interactively online. It’s actually very interesting to play with and see what you develop. Then try to slip one of your new “phrases” into your next business report and see if anyone notices.

I’ve also noticed the practice of “phraseology” occurring in golf among the talking heads who bring us the play-by-play every weekend on the professional circuits. My personal favorite (and by favorite, I mean least liked) is referring to a fairway wood as a “fairway metal.” Come on! Am I the only one who thinks that sounds ridiculous? Some of them even try to substantiate their phraseology by stating that since the clubs are no longer made of wood, they cannot correctly be referred to as fairway woods. So instead, today’s players are lashing at “three metals” in an attempt to reach par 5’s in two shots. Sounds legitimate to some, but I’m not buying it until they also refer to the other clubs in the bag as an “eight stainless steel” or a “five forged steel.” After all, it’s been forever and a day since irons were actually made of iron.....

But lately, I’ve also noticed the trend of phraseology slipping into the golf course design business as well. Perhaps it is because the industry has grown so competitive that architects feel compelled to talk a good game to prospective clients and golf writers in an effort to sell themselves as well as their projects. Given this, I present herewith my top three most perplexing attempts at phraseology from golf course architects I have heard (or read) in recent years. If you know of more, feel free to email them to me, because I know there are undoubtedly more I have mentally blocked from my memory to spare me the confusion.

#3: “I am restoring the course to the way [insert name of famous deceased architect here] would have wanted it.” Well, that’s fine if everyone will be playing the course with wooden shafts and a feathery, but how do we really know what the original architect would have wanted if he were alive today? I think (and I hope) what these architects mean is that they are trying to replicate the same shot values from the original course given the changes in today’s game brought on by improvements in course conditioning and advances in playing equipment. But how would anyone really know how past architects would have reacted to today’s world? In fact, if we could magically resurrect C.B. MacDonald, Allister MacKenzie, Seth Raynor, Donlad Ross, or William Flynn and let them play their courses with today’s equipment, they would be making changes left and right too. As regular readers know, I blame this on the USGA’s lack of real and proactive enforcement, but anyone who truly thinks that the golfers in America today would rather have the bumpy more-dirt-than-turf green surfaces, non-irrigated fairways, and crowned unreceptive greens of the “good ol’ days” might as well invest in a buggy whip factory. Have you even seen the reaction of a player at your local muni when he misses a two-footer because of an “imperfection” in the putting surface?

#2: “I consider myself a minimalist when it comes to golf course design.” Minimalism became the big catch phrase in the early 1990’s after the glut of huge earth moving projects in the 1980’s that bore more of a resemblance to a Tennessee Valley Authority project than a golf course when it came to moving dirt. When this phrase becomes disingenuous (or downright ridiculous) is when the same architect making said statement is moving 1,000,000 cubic yards of dirt on his or her current project! This goes unnoticed to most golfers because they have no understanding of how much a cubic yard truly is. I know this because I was misquoted in an article last year when I referred to some projects in the 1980’s as not being unheard of to routinely move 500,000 cubic yards of dirt to build eighteen holes of golf and it was printed as five million cubic yards—and the only person who called to ask me about it was my father who has been a general contractor for nearly 50 years! True minimalism is difficult to come by these days because land has to be just right and the right piece of property is increasingly more difficult to find in the right location, with plausible access, and for a price that the developer can afford.

#1: “God created hundreds of great golf holes out here. It’s my job to find 18 of the best ones in a routing that works as a golf course.” Pah-lease! I consider myself a God-fearing man, but I’ve actually heard this from more than one well-known architect (I’m not naming names out of professional courtesy) and I find myself scratching my head every time I hear it. Outstanding sites such as Prairie Dunes in Kansas or Bandon Dunes in Oregon notwithstanding, there are not many sites where all you have to do is mow down some areas for greens, pop in some flag sticks, and tee it up. In fact, even Whistling Straits in Wisconsin, as beautiful and natural looking as it is, is obviously contrived by man. And that brings me to that course’s architect and a living legend of golf course architecture, Pete Dye. Be forewarned, I am going to paraphrase here, so my apologies to Mr. Dye if I butcher this too badly. He once said that golfers do not want a course that looks like the native land. They want something to excite them and challenge them. Not a pasture to play on. That was part of his reasoning behind the TPC at Sawgrass—a course designed with one purpose: to make the best players in the world earn it on every shot! I tend to agree with Mr. Dye on this one. If I were a developer and my architect told me that the holes were already there, all he had to do was find them, then I would fire that architect and find them myself. If it were that easy, there would be no golf course architects. And if it does come to that, hopefully we will all have our integrated transitional contingencies in place by that time...

Nathan Grace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Association of America whose freelance “Lipouts” column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2006.