

What's Par Got to Do With It?

By: Nathan Crace Date: Oct. 21, 2008

By the time you read this, we will have elected a new President here in the USA. But this is not about politics. It is far more important. Chances are, this is not the first time you've taken the time to read *Lipouts* in one of a number of golf publications or online at lipouts.com where all of my past columns going back to August of 2001 can be found in the online archives. For that, I am truly thankful. And because of that, you will not be surprised to hear me voice my concern over the accelerated growth of distance in the game by technology and its impacts on the game, the courses, and the people who play—especially you the amateurs. But I am not going to waste your time here railing against the USGA (with whom I really have no personal issue) or ball and club manufacturers (as I have said many times before, they are simply maximizing what they are allowed to do in an effort to maximize investor dividends). And unlike the war on drugs, I do not blame those of you who buy the new technology each year and continuing advancing demand for length off the tee. If you want to know my position on all of these issues, go back and read through the archives. I've been fairly consistent over the years. That's not the point of this column. And it's not a plug...really.

Before we delve too deeply into par, we need to begin with "USGA Par Computation 101" (well, okay, more like "Par for Dummies" because it's the short version). For those of you who don't know, don't care, or never thought about it, par has been measured by the USGA based on yardage using the same simple formula (more or less) since 1917. Don't confuse this with Slope Rating, which takes into account bunkers, water, trees, fairway widths, number of beers consumed per hole, and Congressional gerrymandering to produce a formulation more confusing to most golfers than the NFL's Passer Rating is to John Madden. Beginning in 1917, the par of a hole was established based on this table: par 3—any hole 250 yards and less; par 4—any hole 251 yards to 445 yards; par 5—any hole 446 yards to 599 yards; and par 6 (yes back in 1917)—any hole 600 yards or longer. These were, of course, yardages adopted for men. Bear in mind that this formula was adopted in 1917—the same year Bobby Jones won the Southern Amateur at age 15, the major events were suspended because of World War I, and gasoline was about \$00.19/gallon. Prior to that, official yardages were adopted in 1911 that were about 25 yards or so shorter per hole. So after an initial six years, the USGA felt compelled to make changes to the par computation that more or less have remained unchanged (except for moving the maximum yardage for a par 4 up to 475) since 1917—nearly 100 years. Though, curiously, I cannot find the little table that used to be in print in my new copy of the 2008-09 USGA Rules of Golf....any conspiracy theorists out there?

What occurred to me in recent years, however, is that I keep mentioning how long holes in competition have become not only on the PGA Tour, but also in the US Open and elsewhere. I kept mentioning it, but it never dawned on me that there was a much larger underlying issue at hand. Take, for example, this year's Ryder Cup at Valhalla in Louisville, Kentucky. On the scorecard there were no less than four—yes four—par 4 holes measuring a minimum of 500—yes five hundred—yards in length! When did a par 4 change from a hole measuring 251 yards to 475 yards to a hole measuring between 251 yards and whatevertheheckthetournamentcommitteewantstomakeit. Like many others, I missed that memo. We have been designing courses based on the same standards for decades, but the USGA—who governs the very essence of the game in these fifty states—makes it whatever they want? Something was not right. It almost felt Congress-like.

Remember the longest holes in major championship history? Of course you don't because they change every year. The longest par 4 in a US Open was not the 1966 open, it was the 2008 Open at Torrey Pines where the par 4 6th was a measly 515 yards! In 2007, there was a 288 yard par 3 at Oakmont! Granted, the guys playing in the US Open hit the ball a LOT longer than most any of us mortals, but where is the equity inherent in the game? The great thing about golf is that two players of dissimilar skill can compete on the same course at the same time from different tees and play a fair match using handicaps—in theory. In a Major (and all professional and top amateur events) you play straight up with no strokes for obvious reasons. So given that everyone in these events is of comparable ability to play from the same tees with no handicaps, then to paraphrase Tina Turner, "What's Par Got to Do With It?"

If the USGA doesn't even know what par is anymore, why even deal with it? Why put up with the nagging task of assigning a number of strokes in relation to par for each hole? Is it so you can keep statistics like the number of greens you hit in regulation? Is it because it's easier to keep up with the leader board when you know how many strokes under par the leader is? If the USGA doesn't care that a par four is 515 yards, why should we care? After all, all they do is govern the game and "protect its integrity." Seriously, why do we need par anymore?

Here's my suggestion: do away with par completely and rate courses on what really counts....playability and fun. Give me a couple of weeks, an abacus, a research grant, and an expense account and I'll come up with a formula that's more equitable than the now-rendered-arbitrary yardages and easier to compute than slope. And the best part? It will be as effective as par at keeping score and more effective at helping grow the game, because that's what we really need. In case no one noticed, the person who wins a stroke play tournament is the person who plays the stipulated number of holes in the fewest amount of strokes. So why have par anyway? If you shoot 280 over four days and the next closest person shoots 281, guess what? You win! And it doesn't matter if the tournament committee turned two of the par fives into par fours for the event. You know why? Because no one cares. And you still won! The beauty is in the simplicity. All that matters is aggregate scoring. Fair and simple, easier than a flat tax, and it's good for the environment because you can save trees by not having to print scorecards anymore! All you need is a Sharpie and a clean forearm. And no more DQ's for signing incorrect scorecards (or forearms) because you're just keeping the total score. Michelle Wie will love it!

So there you have it. One of life's little mysteries solved by me, your humble author. It's not "rocket surgery." It's just common sense. Why continue to overcomplicate an already complicated game anyway? I'm sure someone out there will point out my brilliant plan's shortcomings somewhere along the line. But you know what? I don't care. The thought of helping millions of golfers worldwide and saving untold numbers of trees in the process is thanks enough. It's a tingling feeling like MSNBC's Chris Matthews gets when Barrack Obama walks on-stage. And now that I've knocked that one out of the park, it's time to take on some of life's other problems. Like the Fannie Mae/Freddie Mac fiasco, frozen credit markets, and whatever happened to Scott Baio....that one may take more time.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Assoc. 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 his archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know or email him at nathan@watermarkgolf.com. Copyright 2008.