

Why We Play the Game

By: Nathan Crace Date: Sept. 17, 2008

If you watch any cable news, or network news, or read a newspaper, or a magazine, or if you absorb text through your ocular receptors and then import said data into your cerebellum, you know that you cannot help but come into contact with some poll conducted by some group with a very official sounding name who gets paid a lot of money by...well, I don't know who exactly...but by somebody so said groups can inundate us with bar graphs, pie charts, and color-coded factoids that look really cool in color in USA Today or on CNN or Fox News with sound effects that sweep said chart onto the screen and grab your attention while you're trying to grab a bite of lunch, dinner, or breakfast. Who are all of these "typical Americans" being polled for everything from who should be in the White House to who should be out of the Big Brother House? My guess is it's probably a lot of the same people.

Now we have push polls, online polls, internal polls, focus groups, and even dials that you hold to register your immediate feedback to what a politician is lying to you about. I don't know about you, but I've never been polled. It sounds painful. I don't think I even know someone who has been polled. In fact, I doubt if I know someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows someone who was polled. I do remember taking a statistics course in college to learn how to conduct a scientific study by sampling data to give an accurate representation of what the population thought or felt without having to actually ask every man, woman, and child, but I do not remember how to conduct said survey. So I guess I will have to take the pollsters' word for it.

With that diatribe out of the way, allow me to introduce a new study/poll recently released by the National Golf Foundation (NGF) that may actually be of interest to you, the reader. In the interest of full disclosure, I should tell you that our company is a member of their organization (like some many thousands of other people, companies, and groups in the golf industry). Does that make me special? No, but it does make me intellectually honest by telling you before I start picking apart the data. So if you think my opinion is skewed by the fact that I cut them a check once a year, that's your opinion—you can poll the other readers and give me your findings.

In said study/poll, the NGF says it surveyed 850 "core golfers" to see why golfers play golf. Let's begin by dissecting some terminology and then we will delve deeper into the numbers. The NGF defines a "core golfer" as someone who plays more than eight rounds per year....eight. Thankfully, the golf industry does not depend solely on "core golfers" to put food on the table. I suppose a person who plays once a month would be considered "hard core?" My point is that you wouldn't have to go too far at your local muni to find enough "core golfers" to conduct your own study; so right off the bat, I'm cautious about the results/findings of the study/poll. That being said, the point of the poll was to find out why golfers enjoy the game and they were apparently given ten (10) categories from which to choose. Those categories, listed in descending order of weighted percentage of response are: People (19%), Course Conditioning (19%), Course Design (17%), Ball Striking (12%), Score (8%), Weather (7%), Amenities (6%), Course Aesthetics (6%), Exercise (4%), and Competition (3%). Let's delve, shall we?

It's no big surprise that the people we play golf with are tied for the number one reason golfers play golf. Golf is great to spend time with friends, family, associates, etc. and even to meet new people you would probably never meet if not on a golf course. In fact, I believe that many a friendship has been forged in the eighteen holes after a first tee introduction. What is strange to me is the number of people who do NOT want to be paired up with people they do not know on a golf course. They would rather play as a single or twosome and hold up the rest of the course because they're shy. This is one reason many courses have restrictions on singles and twosomes in peak playing times during the day. Tied with people at 19% is course conditioning, bringing to light a fact that I have always believed: course conditioning can overcome deficiencies in design...to a certain point. And going further, there are certain areas of any given course that are more important to the perception of conditioning than others. If you play a course for the first time that has the most immaculate fairways and tees you've ever had the pleasure of walking across but the greens are 50% dirt, and 30% algae, what are you going to tell your friends? "You should have seen those heavenly fairways?" Or "The greens were horrible. They should've given me my money back!" I think we all know the answer....some of you even have that reaction when the greens are stimping at less than 10.

Ball striking came in at 12%. This seems odd to me since score was only 8% and most amateurs would love to score better than they strike the ball—wagers are about scores, not ball striking. One must assume that the 12% who picked ball striking are referring to that feeling you get when you catch one dead solid perfect and it feels like there was no ball there until you look up to see the ball flight you have always dreamed of making a nicely curved arc from your clubface to yonder pin.

Weather was 7%. Personally strange to me, because when the weather is bad I don't play. In fact, I've gotten to where I don't play if it's too hot or too cold and never in the rain unless is competition (which only rated 3% by the way). I would say that for me, weather would have to at least be in the double digits because I'm making sure it's nice *before* I play. Amenities are 6% and that's understandable. Special guest services, a nice locker room, and other such perks make a round unique and memorable.

Exercise was only 4%. No surprise there, given the fact that most people are riding when they play. In fact, I would love to walk when I play, but it goes back to that whole issue with the weather and the fact that after 18 years in Mississippi, I have yet to acclimate to the heat/humidity....and maybe a little to do with being so out of shape.

Coming in at 6% is course aesthetics. Though I'm not exactly sure why only 6% chose aesthetics when 17% chose course design, it ties into the fact that sometimes perception is more important than reality. A poorly-designed course with good conditioning can survive its deficiencies while a classic Donald Ross course with no grass on the greens and bunkers devoid of sand will be struggling for players. However, I think that aesthetics has to be part of the design and not mutually exclusive.

So what does all of this mean to you the golfer, you ask? Probably nothing. You know why you enjoy playing and chances are you didn't get polled for this survey. But the numbers would lead us to believe what we probably knew anyway: we play golf because we enjoy a good course that is challenging enough to be fun and is well-conditioned for the price we pay to play it. Add to that the fact that golf is one of the only things you can do where you get to meet people with similar interests in an idyllic setting and enjoy a few hours away from the hectic pace of modern-day life, and you have all the reason you need to tee it up—riding or walking. Oh, and in my own non-scientific study, I found that 100% of those I surveyed say they enjoyed playing golf because they knew they were free from the possibility of being polled while doing so....still sounds painful.

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.