

An Evolution in Tees for Women

For decades there have been meetings, conferences and seminars where industry leaders have discussed the value of women golfers;

and for years there have been industry discussions about innovative approaches to engage women golfers more fully. Yet, despite all the bluster, very few efforts have been made to broadly or consistently implement the much-touted changes the golf world needs. So you can imagine how thrilled I am to become part of a grassroots effort by top women's organizations that are coming together to address some of the

needed changes in women's golf. In January, I joined with LL4G, EWGA and Golf for Cause® to form the National Women's Golf Alliance (NWGA) to enhance golf for women. A key role for the organization will be to address golf course length, and how length can affect women players.

As one of the few female golf course designers, I have not only studied the "why" behind the length of holes from the forward tees, but have lived it. My father was one of five brothers who, as youngsters during the Great Depression, contributed to

Jonathan's Landing Village Course #6 showing the Forward (125 yards) and Front (113 Yards) markers; photo courtesy Jan Bel Jan.

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their household income by caddying at Highland Country Club in Pittsburgh, Pa. There, he and my uncles learned that when the women players struck the ball as well as their male counterparts, the women were rewarded with the same, but rarer, success of par. The women were much more elated than the men at achieving this because par was so exceptional for them.

After WWII, my father became a club professional and, in the mid-1950s, accepted the challenge to design and supervise the construction, then be the pro-superintendent of a new course. My dad used the knowledge he gained caddying to place the forward tees where well-struck shots would allow women to get on greens in regulation. He knew that when women's abilities were designed into the length, they played more golf because they took fewer strokes, played in less time and were less tired at the end of their rounds.

It was fun for women to play the course my dad designed. As a result, there was a high percentage of "couples' golf." These were the days when golf professionals made their living almost exclusively on lessons and selling merchandise in the "pro shop" (thus, the name). Higher golf participation by women meant increased purchases by both men and women – and food on our family's table!

In the 1980s, stellar amateur golfer and past president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, Alice Dye, designed and promoted the "Two-Tee System for Women." Her efforts influenced most golf course designers to create tees shorter than the 5600+

yards commonly found until then. Consequently, there was an increase in the number of women players.

Today, there is evidence that some course operators are listening to their



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clientele and/or to the clientele they desire to have on their courses; the operators are adding new, shorter tees on some, if not all holes, to engage new players.

Depending on the terrain and demographics, the investment for adding new tees ranges from nominal to costly. The cost dictates how long it will take to achieve a return on the investment. Some operators choose to add tees only on the most intimidating holes first; some choose to make all adjustments in one season.

It takes time to plan for the proper position/location, to plan for the construction and grow-in, and to plan programs for maximum use of the new tees. All these issues need to be considered to achieve the highest satisfaction by players and, thus, the increase in play which provides the return on investment.

Another factor that needs to be considered in the placement of new tees is education of the players. Many

years ago, I re-designed a course with five sets of tees. The “tips” were lengthened and the forward set was made more fair (i.e. shorter) for those with slower clubhead speeds. Because they were not taking as many strokes on the new course, the women in one league felt deprived of their “normal” number of strokes and the amount of time they spent on the course. So, they moved back to a set of tees longer than the original set they played! In this instance, the issue was beyond that of truly “evolved” tee locations. Educational and supportive programs were not in place to encourage understanding and use of the new tees. Fortunately, many of today's women

golfers are more knowledgeable about golf and their games.

As the industry learns and comprehends that women of lesser skill levels will play more golf if yardages are more inviting, more operators are embracing this concept. Their successes, measured in improved pace of play, additional tee times, more rounds played and new members, are beginning to inspire other operators and other clubs to create tees allowing more “greens in regulation” for more players.

With the help of NWGA – and you – this trend will be coming soon to a course near you. You can help by asking your golf course operator to create additional, fairer tees, and to contact NWGA for assistance in 2012.

Jan Bel Jan considers herself “a defender of fun as well as par,” and designs courses with equity in mind, as well as ecology. She has been a top golf course designer for more than three decades. In 2000 and 2005, she was named “One of the 10 Most Powerful Women in the Game of Golf” by Sports Illustrated Plus. To learn more, visit janbeljan.com or e-mail Jan at jan_beljan@nationalwomensgolfalliance.com.