



How I Made Golf Easier—and a Lot More Fun

BY JOE PASSOV

I checked my ego at the door. Now I'm playing faster, scoring lower and enjoying the game more

IT WAS a snap decision 18 months ago that made me fall in love with golf again.

On a warm, early October day in suburban Dallas, I arrived at the first tee at one of the most difficult courses in the country. The course—Omni PGA Frisco's Fields Ranch East—was designed to challenge the sport's most skilled competitors; it would surely overmatch my ever-dwindling ability. I braced for a frustrating day and a high score.

But as I steeled myself to

tackle this formidable layout, I had an epiphany: Move to one of the tees farther up, do what I could to make the course easier, and—most of all—stop worrying about my score.

And so began my new golf mantra: Have fun.

I could never drive the ball that far, but at one time, I sported a respectable 6 handicap. Now that I'm well north of age 60, my swing speed, ball speed and foot speed have diminished. Playing from my usual set of middle tees at most courses, I

would hit a decent tee shot on a par 4 yet still face an imposingly long second shot to reach the green—or else have no chance at all. Golf became repetitive, and demoralizing, because I couldn't score as low as I used to.

Swallowing my pride

I don't know why I endured that unpleasantness for so long, or why the ridiculousness of it dawned on me that day in Texas. Why was I playing this game if I wasn't enjoying it?

So I rebelled. I swallowed my pride and announced to my playing partners that I would be teeing off from the silver markers—what used to be known as the senior tees. I got several quizzical looks and perhaps a snicker. And I admit that it felt weird, as if I were cheating. But then it happened: My drives were now up with several of my companions who were playing from farther back. After three holes, I was grinning. Pars and birdies were within reach again if I could execute properly.

After four holes, one of the other golfers who had been struggling joined me at the silvers. We both relished the fun we were experiencing. It wasn't just about getting better scores. I could now

play the course as it was designed to be played—coming up with a strategy for each hole, using different clubs to play the best shot, instead of just whaling away hoping to hit it as far as I could.

More important, I was enjoying myself.

To be sure, hitting from the closer set of tees isn't the only thing I've done to make the game a bit easier. I'm less concerned with competitions and scores, so I'm no longer beating myself up over short putts; if I miss, I wasn't going to break the course record, anyway. And if I'm having a really bad hole, I'm fine picking up the ball and marking down the maximum allowable score for handicap purposes—if I keep score at all.

'Just try'

Recently, I asked Andy Fisher,

director of golf at Desert Mountain Club in Scottsdale, Ariz., if he had ever wanted to tell golfers they might benefit by starting a little closer to the hole. It had to be awkward—essentially pointing out that they aren't as good as they used to be, or as they might think they are.

He said that at a previous club, he had done just that, pointing out to a group of older members a newly installed set of forward tees.

"I asked them if they would try them," says Fisher. "Just try them." Fisher says he didn't want to rile them by suggesting it was better for them, more reflective of their ability. So, he says, "I told them it was a pace-of-play experiment, and everybody was going to play from those tees that day."

Fisher says the group played 30 minutes faster, and got lower scores. They loved it—and never went back to their old tees.

"They didn't want to hear that they were getting older," he says. "They didn't want to hear how much fun they were going to have, because they were opposed to the idea, as we all are, of aging and limitations."

Fisher likens it to taking the driver's license away from a parent.

"How do you say that without saying what we need to say? They were playing faster and scoring better. We just had to get them to try it," he says.

I know exactly how they felt. Fortified by wisdom and perspective, if not extra distance from my driver, I'm more eager to tee it up now than I've been in 20 years. My rapidly thinning, gradually graying hair tells me that I'm not the man I was two decades ago. But you would never know it by my newfound enthusiasm for the game.

See you at the senior tees.

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