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How will the coronavirus pandemic change the way we look at golf?

There are choppy times ahead, but golf should emerge strong.

Tim Gavrich

March 27, 2020





A silver lining - if you could call it that - of the coronavirus pandemic could be a rediscovery of the joys of walking a golf course.

Peter Byrne/Getty Images

Coronavirus is not going away anytime soon. It has put a massive strain on our healthcare system, sent the economy into a global bear market and sent most of us indoors, with vanishingly few opportunities to escape cabin fever.

Although this episode in world history is far from over, it is not too early to start thinking about what we should be learning from this shared, creeping trauma.

This experience will change every realm of industry to some extent. So how might our little niche of interest, golf, be affected? Once we have flattened the curve, found scalable mass treatment, and gotten on with a more “normal” daily life, what lessons will ring through to the game we love?

Widespread shortages of basic hygiene-related products, from hand sanitizer to toilet paper, seem to indicate that we are all going to become more diligent about cleanliness going forward. Having read dozens of email blasts from businesses – golf courses included – about increased cleaning practices, I am inclined to think that they will not simply revert to pre-pandemic standards once the danger has subsided.

Similarly, I would expect the public – especially golfers, who skew older and therefore more susceptible to coronavirus and other infectious diseases – to do their own part. The final-green handshake has always been a beautiful tradition, but it seems it will fall by the wayside, at least for the foreseeable future.

I have never been a fan of leaving the flagstick in for a putt of any makeable distance, but this is another sacrifice that seems necessary, at least for a while. On the flip side, this experience has wrung incredible creativity from the MacGyvers of golf: its superintendents, who have come together to figure out how to present their courses in a way that works with the new realities this pandemic has forced us to face.

“Please do not remove the flag when putting.”

My leave for par on the first hole: pic.twitter.com/ZPGoiHeUWA

– Tim Gavrich (@TimGavrich) March 20, 2020

Not only will outside operations staff be wiping down golf carts more thoroughly in the future, but members and guests will be armed with their own products to sanitize the surfaces they touch, especially golf carts.

Speaking of carts, while I know they will continue to be a big part of the recreational game, I hope some golfers will rethink their dependency on them as an alternative to walking the course in the wake of the pandemic. Several courses, like [Wilmington \(N.C.\) Municipal Golf Course](#), have temporarily stopped allowing carts because they force pairs of people into close quarters, certainly closer than the six-foot clearance many “social distancing” guidelines suggest.

Extreme social distancing strategy in golf —play with our group and hit it straight! pic.twitter.com/t22sASKd9W

— James Ehrlich, MD (@earlydetectdoc) March 27, 2020

The Gov says golf is a great way to get out of the house and keep your social distancing. We are still open!
[#getoutandplay](#) pic.twitter.com/RX0PUfum5B

— Lake MacBride Golf Club (@MacbrideGolf) March 27, 2020

In these cases, how many golfers have been forced to remember how much more direct and invigorating a nine- or 18-hole walk can be than a zigzagging ride across fairways and around tees and greens? And even though many golfers opt for carts despite knowing their round will be cheaper if they walk, the economic squeeze the coronavirus will put on people may make walking rounds of golf not just healthier but more fiscally viable. Perhaps personal pull-cart sales will rise.

(Here’s hoping, also, that the sidelining of cart fleets will help course operators who mistakenly believe walking makes rounds take longer to realize that play has moved nicely at their courses during the coronavirus pandemic, and give up this stance.)

Renewed attention to hygiene will also have significant effects on how everyday commercial transactions happen, especially at golf courses. Any opportunity to keep multiple hands from touching cash or credit cards should be explored, and I would fully expect golf courses to increasingly encourage pre-payment for rounds.

Soon, the traditional pro shop check-in procedure may become obsolete. Courses that tout the “member for a day” experience should be especially excited at the possibility of inviting guests to simply check in with an outdoor starter and do whatever they want – practice, grab a drink, browse pro shop merchandise, relax in the locker room – before their tee time.

GolfNow, the largest third-party golf tee time provider (and owned by the same parent company as Golf Advisor, NBC-Universal), is helping a growing number of its more than 9,000 client courses cut down on person-to-person contact when golfers pay for their rounds by modifying their system to allow for green fee pre-payment.

"These golf courses are trying to maintain viable businesses while also working to safeguard the health and safety of their staff and their customers, so they are facing an entirely new set of challenges," said GolfNow senior vice president Jeff Foster. "We've been able to provide some of our existing technology in new ways in order to give them options and help them navigate these challenges more successfully, as well as give both golf courses and golfers added peace of mind."

Even after coronavirus concerns abate, this system can remain in place to help golf courses streamline their check-in procedures. Moreover, the removal of this formality at the front of every golf experience should also help make the game less intimidating to newcomers and outsiders.

Interesting. State of Washington rules specifically allow courses to continue operation. Good precedent for golf associations in other states to use if needed. @MiGCSA @GCSAA @CarolinasGCSA pic.twitter.com/9ERvsB36u7

Speaking of the outside perspective, this is where I see a significant opportunity for golf to sell itself to the apathetic and skeptical.

Because of the expansiveness of golf courses, they have (for the most part) been more resistant to forced closure than many other avenues of recreation during the pandemic.



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Because we're all gradually getting sick of being indoors, a socially-distanced walk with friends is more appealing than ever to people who (fairly justifiably) have typically seen golf as an excuse for cart-riding and beer-swilling.

Because most of us are going to feel some level of economic stress, the less-expensive side of golf is going to be more worth showcasing than ever. The only question is whether golf's most influential institutions will be able to seize the opportunity to welcome more people to the game once the danger has passed.

Finally, I think golfers will see the appeal of a more stripped-down approach to the game. Sure, great clubhouses and 19th holes are nice additions to a round of golf, but when push comes to shove, golfers are there for the golf. Arriving at the spartan-but-well-maintained course, playing a briskly-paced round on foot and getting back home in decent time has its charms, too, especially in a world where we are usually pressed for leisure time.

I'm optimistic by nature, so I hope that, as rough an experience as this may end up being for all of us, the game of golf can ultimately emerge stronger, more sustainable and more appreciated than ever.



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Tim Gavrich

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[robert lincoln](#)

Commented on 03/28/2020

Tim, you have nailed it! Thanks for being the first to post positive ways of looking at the game of golf post covid19. No doubt behaviors will change and your points about the positive effects for the game could improve the experience and perhaps help grow the game. As an advocate for growing the game for decades (see Family Golf Assoc. of 1995) I look forward to seeing the powers at be simplifying the formalities and similarly seeing the game less intimidating. There is a great opportunity here to see some important changes.

Keep up the great work!

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Ken

Commented on 03/27/2020

I hope that the courses are using this time to get greens and fairways in tip top condition.

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