



Different Cultures – Same Sport – Different Operational Practices Are There Lessons to Be Learned?

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Where is the Better Golf Experience: British Isles or US?

From its origin in the 15th century in Fife, Scotland, golf, a game that featured players hitting a rock or pebble around terrain that involved sand dunes, hills and obstacles, has evolved to where tourist flock from around the globe flock to the British Isles to play the famed courses.

Today, thirty percent of the Top 100 Golf Courses in the World as ranked by Travel Editor, Joe Passov and his panelists at Golf Magazine are located in England, Ireland and Scotland. The pedigree of these classic venues is unquestioned – the history, the natural terrain, the riveted bunkers, the gentle rolling greens and the panoramic views of the oceans are compelling. In a perverse way, even the wind and rain add to the enjoyable adventure. The fact that one is likely to end with the golf ball they start with, in great contrast to the modern US courses, is also inviting. There is a lesson here for US golf course architects.

The extremely cordial and accommodating European staffs greet the visitor kindly, routinely exceeding the customer service received at the vast majority of US courses. Unsure, just as a women if they feel comfortable and courteously treated consistently in many US Pro Shops.

Or merely ask the US visitor as to their experience service at Gleneagles, Scotland for a comparison of service standards. Though neither a scheduled golf or hotel guest, after 30 hours upon arriving in Manchester, this tired weary golfer had played 54 holes at Woodhall Spa (Hotchiss and Bracken) and Ganton, drove nearly 500 miles, largely on roads that were a car and a half wide, and upon approaching Gleneagles to tour the PGA Centenary course, home of the 2014 Ryder Cup, filled his diesel engine car with regular gasoline. Oops! With the car inoperative and desiring to be 120 miles away within 12 hours to visit the new Trump International, the hotel reservationist, the enchanting and elegant Ms. Kate Richie, and the Concierge Mr. Jack were so attentive and incredible in ensuring safe passage that Gleneagles is now the default hotel of choice when playing near Glasgow. The service received was so stunning and far exceeded that properties 5 star designation.

Truth be told, if it weren't for the distance, the airfare, jet lag, iffy hotels, mediocre food, and challenged driving, most golfers I suspect would opt to play the courses "across the pond"

regularly. I certainly would and that is why this author perhaps enjoys Bandon Dunes so much. It reminds me of the best the British Isles offers.

But in realizing what is great about playing in the British Isles, it makes one ponder if golf course operators in the United States have lost focus of what is important to the golfer? Should the focus be on providing a great value based golf experience from the 1st hole to the 18th tee or providing numerous amenities and accoutrements befitting of elitists as the golfer proceeds on the “assembly line of golf” from reservation to arrival to departure?

The Differences in Operation are Surprising – simple, understated execution

The simplicity of the golf operations in the British Isles has an alluring appeal. There is no free bottled water, tees, divot repair tools, or bag tags that are complimentary and customary at US courses priced over \$75. Try to find a pencil with the name of Woodhall Spa, Ganton, Cruden Bay, Royal Dornoch, or Nairn stenciled on it. Pencils with course names were only seen at Castle Stuart and Loch Lomond. The only free tees that were noticed was in a bowl by the 1st hole tee marker at Royal Dornoch and Loch Lomond. Ball markers are sold not given away at nearly all courses.

What hole are you on? Don't look at the flag. Yellow on the outward nine, red on the inward nine with the merely the name of the course adorned on the pennant. Nothing more.

What did you shoot on that hole after the drop, the penalty strokes, and the putt that was given? Really, doesn't matter as the Stableford system is the common scoring game amongst locals. There is something soothing about the Stableford scoring of 1 point for a bogey, 2 for a par, 3 for a birdie. The BIPS (ball in pocket) posted in the US seems to come with a stigma that you just aren't that good and should be able to finish the hole. Though the USGA handicap system provides for a maximum score, not completing a hole seems like your cheating. Even a bogey with the Stableford feels like a reward.

The hours in the pro shops are very business-like. Ganton opens at 8 a.m. and closes at 5 p.m. Woodhall Spa pro shop operates 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. The range closes at 7 p.m. though daylight exists until after 10 in the summer. Golfers are able to play starting at 7 a.m. You merely go into the pro shop after the round to pay as we were advised by the locker room attendants. The trust extended reaps rewards in loyalty.

Interestingly, airlines and golf are the only two segments in the US hospitality industry where you are required to pay before receiving the service. Why can't, like in Japan and Korea, golfers being issued a member number secured by a credit card, in which all charges are posted to an account that is settled at the end of the day? It would seem the convenience of merely saying, “charge number 6910” would stimulate additional sales rather than the hassle of having to find and pull out your wallet for every purchase at a US Course.

Is golf meant to be physical exercise? While I understand the importance of cart revenue to the profitability of a golf course as it approaches 60% of green fees, it is refreshing that the British Isles courses eschew carts (buggies) for trolleys. Part of the delight of playing golf over there is the ability to walk for exercise. The green to tee walks at most US courses built since 1990 preclude that.

Unsure that the canvas on which American courses have recently been crafted has become too large? Using a Nike Fuel band, we measured the steps required to walk some recently played golf courses. The results were startling. The courses in the British Isles and US courses built nearly a 100 yards ago are far more compact as noted below:

Course	Country	Steps - 1 st Tee to 18 th Green
Ganton	England	8,921
Brora	Scotland	9,563
Woodhall Spa (Hotchin)	England	10,654
Nairn	Scotland	11,179
Eugene Country Club	Oregon	11,639
Royal Dornoch	Scotland	11,754
Loch Lomond	Scotland	11,984
Cherry Hills	Colorado	12,321
Trump International	Scotland	12,647
Bandon Dunes	Oregon	12,914
Castle Stuart	Scotland	13,124
Hawktree	North Dakota	13,140
Colorado Golf Club	Colorado	14,567
Old MacDonald	Oregon	14,854
Links of North Dakota	North Dakota	16,694

Miles walked ranged from a simple 10K (6 ¼ miles) to over 9 miles. Calories burnt varied from 1,045 to 1,650. In using an Ipod to measure the time elapsed while walking, less than 1 hour and 45 minutes was actually spent during the 18-hole round. It is interesting to me that over 50% of the time consumed playing golf is either in the hitting or waiting for a golfing partner to play.

In this time crunched culture, if 18 holes could be played in 3 ½ hrs, the longest round played in the British Isles except for Trump International and Castle Stuart, rounds would likely increase. Mine certainly would. I haven't played on a Saturday or Sunday in a regularly scheduled group

in over 20 years. A foursome at a Colorado private club recently took 43 emails to coordinate with the group. Too much brain damage.

Just showing up, finding a game, and walking on, as we did at 3 of the Scottish courses, is such a treat. The great thing about golf is the opportunity to form new friendships by meeting a stranger and enjoying pounding the pellet together as I did with a member of the Honorable Company of Edinburgh (Muirfield) at Trump International or a Dell executive at Nairn.

Recently, we reviewed with a US architect the renovation of a 9-hole course expanding it to 18 holes. The vistas are expansive. The acreage ample. The comment was made, that where there are currently six holes, there should only be 3 and that there was a need to find draws, saddles and bowls for every hole on this rolling farm land. It was suggested that a large canvas requires a large course on this 800 acre parcel. My perspective is the opposite. Less acreage reduces maintenance expenses which affords the owner the opportunity to lower prices to attract more customers. Golf has gotten too expensive.

In America, I think we have gotten confused that big equals good, harder represents greater enjoyment and that lavishing amenities on the golfer is a suitable substitute for a warm smile, a pleasant greeting and personalized service.

It is with the awareness that luxury once experienced becomes a necessity. It is also with an understanding that all golf courses would have to adopt a more simplified model to ensure the value = experience – price formula remained consistent between facilities. However, I wistfully wonder whether if golf course net income would increase in the US if the more economical operational practices used in the British Isles were adopted.