



## There is no greatest golf course: there are only greatest golf courses

**Mike Nuzzo**

Not long after golf began, so did the debate between players as to what was the better golf course in the village. Over the last century this has evolved into a global argument as to what are the greatest courses in the world. Every golf and resort magazine, seemingly, prints its own periodic definitive rankings. The deliberations continue and no one agrees completely with the lists or with each other. Some courses have universal appeal, but even they are rarely seen identically. Everyone has a slightly different definition of the ultimate golf course. This aspect is just one of the many great pleasures of the game. Why do so many players' opinions differ? Howard Moskowitz is a noted expert in the

field of psychophysics—the study of human preferences and their detection ability. His studies have made revolutionary discoveries about colas, coffee, spaghetti sauce and pickles. According to Malcolm Gladwell:

Initially, Pepsi wanted him to identify the perfect amount of sweetener for Diet Pepsi. Moskowitz did the logical thing by making up experimental batches with every conceivable degree of sweetness and gave them to hundreds of people, and looked for the concentration that people liked the most. But the data was a mess—there wasn't a pattern—Moskowitz realized that they had been

asking the wrong question. There was no such thing as the perfect Diet Pepsi; they should have been looking for the perfect Diet Pepsis.<sup>1</sup>

Moskowitz found several other food taste categories that are also segmented. One famous, extensive study was with spaghetti sauce. He determined that everyone had a slightly different definition of what a perfect spaghetti sauce tasted like. He discovered that most people's preferences fell into one of three broad groups: plain; spicy; extra-chunky. This was an especially important finding: there was no extra-chunky spaghetti sauce in the market at that time!



**OPPOSITE** The par-5 fourteenth hole has the smallest green at Wolf Point Club, Texas—also the wildest. (Photograph by Mike Nuzzo)

OPPOSITE Wolf Point's much-admired par-3 sixth hole needed some clearing to build, but not much else. (Photograph by Mike Nuzzo)

As with eating, golf is also biologically enjoyable—some even prefer playing golf to eating! Recently, the National Golf Foundation (NGF) published a survey on what the player seeks in enjoyment of the game. It reported that conditioning, camaraderie, design and scoring were among the greatest factors contributing to a player's enjoyment of the game. Trying to remove some of these universals to determine what defines course preferences is a very challenging psychophysics investigation. How is the current golf-course industry segmented? Today, when someone is developing a new course or ranking existing ones, the divisions are almost always limited to public, private, municipal, cost, resort, modern or old. But is that really the best way to typify a golfer? If you were to recommend a course to a friend it is doubtful that any of those descriptors would sway his/her opinion. What you would be more likely to describe are the aspects you most admire about a course.

Are there different categories of courses that suit segments of golfers? I believe golfers can be subdivided into three types or

groupings: those who relish the playing challenge; those who revere the course's environment; and those who place the enjoyment-factor above all else. Compounding the confusion is that most golfers want the experience to overlap all three endpoints—but they seek them to different degrees. According to Moskowitz, 'The mind knows not what the tongue wants'.<sup>2</sup> In Moskowitz's spaghetti sauce study, he determined that when he optimised for each individual preference, it would yield the greatest appreciation only by that specific group. When optimising for everyone, the results of each individual preference group were substantially less. It became apparent to Moskowitz that when he made one group happier, he disenfranchised another group. He says:

We did this for coffee, and we found that if you try and target all segments the best you can score is above average. But if I design for specific tastes or sensory segmentations, I can get an order of magnitude higher, and with coffee that is something you'd die for.<sup>3</sup>

So happiness, in one sense, is a function of how closely our world conforms to the infinite variety of human preference.

I suggest ranking courses based on the type of player by categorising the greatest courses in the world. Try to place each course in the respective category where it naturally best fits—challenging; pretty; or fun. This works even better with the less-vaunted courses, and it wouldn't be much of a leap to describe architects in this same manner. The following few paragraphs provide identifiers of each segment.

The challenge-centric golfer wants every facet of his/her game tested, and for the hole and its required strategy to be clearly visible. They want to be rewarded for a well-struck shot down the middle of the fairway and hate missing putts, either of their own volition, or not. They want the course to be presented fairly and the greens to be nearly flat. They prefer stroke-play events, and I place the typical golf professional in this grouping. Famed courses such as Pine Valley, Oakmont and Shinnecock Hills fit this player to a tee.

The environment-based golfer loves great



OPPOSITE Draped against a natural drainage swale, the closer you get to Wolf Point's par-3 fifteenth green the more serpent-like it appears. (Photograph by Mike Nuzzo)

maintenance, pretty views, and lots of flow-ers, waterfalls and fountains. The stereotypical player of this persuasion could be an executive out hitting a few shots on the course, with or without a cart, enjoying the all-pervading scenery, or merely indulging in relaxing chit-chat. This type of golfer might not even keep score, know all the rules or care less. It doesn't hurt to be reminded that a percentage of the market segment who prefer a pretty course don't even play golf. They utilise a golf course in a whole different way: by choosing to live on the periphery. Cypress Point, Pebble Beach and Augusta National are the poster courses for this type of consumer.

The fun-influenced golfer, like the others, loves the game, but is usually more interested in the course or the history and is certainly more whimsical. They can laugh loudest when hitting into a 'hidden' bunker, and enjoy a subtle strategy. They want their golf ball to stay 'in play' when missing a shot, and prefer more contour to the greens. The returned score is a low priority, as match play is often *their game*. The Old Course at St Andrews and National Golf Links of

America (NGLA) are the two standouts that fit this segment.

I'm sure you've noticed how the best debates about golf courses are often heated. Is there a hierarchy of taste? Is one type of player (or course) a higher ideal to aspire to? Many believe their particular flavour is the evolution of the highest order. Did you ever hear a club professional comment that a course is no good because it's too easy? Or that the course is 'tricked-up', or way too long? My answer is an absolute 'no' to a hierarchy of taste. There are just different tastes in the same way that someone may prefer spicy, plain or extra-chunky spaghetti sauce.

The six million dollar question is: what should a new course developer build? A typical business plan would be to have as many rounds as possible. So, traditionally, they would build the course that can meet the objectives of as many players as possible. And like coffee when that is the goal, everyone usually enjoys the course (in part) because everyone enjoys the game—but, at best, everyone enjoys it a little bit less. Why not develop to one particular taste, and then

the fun-influenced golfers might flock to your course. There's no guesswork involved; we know this for it coincides closest to their preference.

If in charge of a city developing three new courses, I'd create one of each kind to market to each segment. But because it's very expensive to build just one golf course, most developers try to cater to all, when it's surely more effective to develop for one segment. The challenge is to identify the under-served market segment. Such a philosophy makes sense on economic grounds, too. When you think about it, if building a fun or pretty course is your goal, you wouldn't have to make it long and could save a lot of capital and annual maintenance. This, automatically, makes it quicker to play, because the demographic you are catering to doesn't even care about it being 500 yards less than other courses. The occasional challenge-player might play and tell his buddies that the layout isn't as good as Shinnecock; but it wasn't created for this segment ... so that's okay.

Bobby Jones, famously, felt that Augusta National was an ideal course. It appealed to



The eighth and eighteenth holes at Wolf Point culminate in a large, beautifully designed double-green, where golfers experience an array of enjoyable shotmaking options. (Photograph by Mike Nuzzo)



the challenge-golfer and the fun-influenced golfer at the same time. It is also considered one of the best-maintained and prettiest inland courses in the world. Today, however, Augusta National has been evolving and changing on this spectrum, with equipment technological advancements leading the way in order to test the best players in the world. Augusta had to leave its heritage of ‘fun’ behind, as challenge and fun are often in

opposition because ‘length of shots’ is one of the greater golfing challenges and, at the same time, one of the least-fun aspects of the game.

Maybe someday instead of saying that the new ‘Towny Links Golf Course’ is a par seventy-two championship test with eighteen signature holes, it will announce itself, first and foremost, as being either challenging, pretty or fun. Until that time, all we can do is

cut through the marketing ‘fluff’ and decide for ourselves. Given all of the above: what type of course is your home course? And while you’re considering: what type of golfer are you?