

Women's Golf Article
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Attracting women to golf, making them feel comfortable and accepted at golf facilities, and retaining them as long-term golfers remains an ongoing challenge for PGA Professionals throughout the country. One proven way PGA Professionals can appeal to women and help them embrace our game of a lifetime is through instruction programs carefully tailored to their needs while recognizing their expectations and cultivating their talents.

During the past decade, there have been studies, seminars, cracker barrels, professional speakers, and others who have taught us what we need to do to keep women a part of our market and show them they need golf as a part of their lives. So what is the problem? I think for most women, golf is like a 5,000-calorie helping of Hungarian goulash. They will try it, but then politely say "No, thank you."

The question is, why didn't they like golf when they tried it?

The answer may lie in providing instructional programs designed to help women enjoy the game without constantly comparing their results to those of their male counterparts. Many women enjoy the social aspects of golf as much as the competitive component of the game. Instructional and participation programs that embrace both in a casual atmosphere can appeal to a broad base of women golfers.

One of my female students asked me one day if she would ever hit the ball more than 150 yards off the tee. To her, golf just isn't fun if she can't smack it like her playing partners. How you respond to your female students' questions could make or break her golfing career. If you play to her ego and tell her she will hit the ball 180 yards at some point, it wouldn't do either of you any good. Her distance potential had already been reached. Do you tell her that off the tee, 150 yards is good for her and risk sounding condescending?

This scenario plays out every day at facilities across the country. There are plenty of women who hit it much farther than 150 yards off the tee. But in my experience, a majority of women are distance challenged. I am not being derogatory toward female golfers -- only honest. Many women just aren't strong enough, many women don't have enough time to practice, and many women aren't Olympic athletes. Women like honesty. They like to know where they stand. If 150 yards is all they will get this summer off the tee, you must be a creative enough teacher to step away from mechanics and teach them the game. Driving it 150 yards is plenty -- if you know what to do next.

This season, try something different with your female students. Of course, your students must learn the basics so they can get the ball in the air and moving forward. But once they have a repeatable motion, shift your thinking as an instructor.

Instead of focusing on swinging moves and perfect body positions, focus on playing moves. Much like chess or bridge, each move must be thought out. The shots are their playing pieces and the course is their board. How they get it to the hole in the least moves is the fun of the game. But you must teach women what moves are in their hand. With a playbook for their own game, their time on the course will be exhilarating instead of frustrating. Their time will be spent challenging their own strategy. Women would

learn that it is truly about beating the course, rather than their fellow competitor. Then and only then will many women we teach come back for more.

Your job as their instructor is to give them a playbook. If possible, take your students on the course. Show them how to think their way around the course by pointing out how to avoid their nemesis situations and how to play to their strengths. Remind women to use tricks to make fairways seem larger and trouble appear smaller. Evaluate their equipment and make sure they have a high-lofted wood or hybrid iron that they love and can hit comfortably. They must love this club because they will use it continually on par-3s, par-4s and par-5s.

Women must develop three short-game shots -- a low runner, a high stopper, and a bunker shot. That is it. They do not need fancy shots until their playbook expires and they are ready for a new one. A putting stroke that repeats is mandatory. It is the trump card of their games.

As far as your female students' mental strategy is concerned, you must give them permission to make mistakes. Our handicapping system is in place because very few golfers shoot par. We must realize that our students will make mistakes. In fact, our 18-handicap students get 18 mistakes built in each time they play. How different would your 18-handicap student feel on the first tee knowing they were allowed 18 mistakes that day? Would that first tee shot be quite so nerve wracking? Would that shot over the water be as stressful? My female students know based on their handicaps that they have "oops" shots in their playbook. It helps them get over the misses and back into the game faster.

Finally, women need more options. Until facilities, designers and golf professionals are willing to give women more tee-box options, many women will not continue to play. At this point, most facilities offer one forward tee option and then rate the men's tee for women. Why are we moving backward in this regard? Instead, let's offer three or four tee boxes for women. Why not put two more sets of tees in front of the forward tees. They could even be markers in the fairways to keep costs down. Then, rate one or two of the back tees for women. You will then cover all your female players and find that your juniors and seniors will be thrilled, too. A variety of forward tee boxes will make the game more enjoyable for women and can expedite play for all golfers who don't hit the ball long distances.

To grow your women's market, shift your teaching philosophy. Mechanics are important, but they will not keep most women interested very long. Help women understand that golf is a game of strategy and moves that when coordinated effectively creates a sport that is life long and totally addictive. Then we will have captured the women's market.

Women belong on the golf course, on the lesson tee, and in your facilities. You have the opportunity to introduce your facilities to women June 3-10 during the American Express Women's Golf Week presented by Golf for Women magazine. Go to <http://www.playgolfamerica.com> and sign up for a Women's Golf Week program. Together, all of us can make a difference in growing the game.