

A Golf Course Experiment: Why Not Five, Seven, 12 Holes?

By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT



A Michigan course owner offers shorter loops to make the game friendlier



Garrett Ferguson

Owner Bob Griffioen, shown at the 17th hole at Island Hills Golf Clubs in Michigan, is an experimenter.

Centreville, Mich.

Anyone who shows up at Island Hills Golf Club here without clubs can use a top-of-the-line set from Adams Golf at no charge, with a few balls thrown in for good measure. Need a lesson? You can get one free, including a free mini-round and \$5 credit in the restaurant. Families play free on Sundays after 4 p.m. Kids under 13 play free anytime when accompanied by a paying adult. Replay rounds are less than half price.

But Island Hills' most out-of-the-box innovation is its Quik Courses—designated loops within the 7,074-yard championship layout that golfers can buy a la carte. Depending on how much time they have, they can play five-hole, seven-hole, nine-hole, or 12-hole rounds.

Thus far, it would be hard to call the Quik Courses a raging success. Through July, only about 100 players have paid to play the shorter rounds, mostly women who live locally. "Overall our play is up dramatically, but a lot of our customers drive in from Grand Rapids or Battle Creek or Elkhart (Indiana)," said Andy Mears, Island Hills' chief operating officer. "They're all curious about the short loops, and think they're a great idea, but when you drive 30 minutes or an hour to get here, you want to play 18 holes." He thinks the concept might work better in a metropolitan setting, where more people live close by and could squeeze in a one- or two-hour golf experience.

Griffioen isn't discouraged. "Honestly, we don't have enough data yet to know where we stand," he said. "Golf is slow to change. Long term, I'm still hoping the short loops will catch on."

If they do, he said, he won't consider his efforts a success unless other courses follow his lead. "That's why I'm doing this, to develop a model that works," he said.

"And if it doesn't fly, after we've done all this and finished all our tweaking, then you have to wonder—are they right when they say golf's problems are that it's too expensive and too slow and too difficult? They may be wrong, you know?"

—Email John Paul at golfjournal@wsj.com

A version of this article appeared August 3, 2013, on page A9 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: The New Customizable Course.