

The Rhythm and Flow of a Golf Course

Good rhythm and flow on a golf course is like good theater – there is a series of acts that build upon one another to create a sum greater than its parts. The rhythm and flow is critical to creating a good golf course experience because great holes that don't connect and flow together won't "complete" a course like a good sequence of holes can.

The great courses of the world, whether they are links like Royal Dornoch or an inland course like Augusta National, have great rhythm and flow and world-class holes that make them desirable to play every day. Certainly there are many non-famous courses that are fun and challenging for their players on a regular basis – that may be the true meaning of good rhythm and flow.

A big part of the rhythm and flow of a course is directly related to the routing, or sequencing, of holes – how one hole ties into another. Another is how the native landscape is utilized to emphasize playing strategy, vistas, or natural features. A walkable golf course provides a human scale to the rhythm and flow, allowing a golfer to set his game to his rhythm. Great rhythm and flow balances these factors so that one doesn't overpower the others or diminish them to insignificance – such a course becomes one-dimensional and less fun over time.

ROUTING

Routing is the sequencing of holes on a golf course from the first tee to the last green. It has to have a progression from one hole to the next, and that sequencing should develop a rhythm. It can build up to a distinct hole or vista. Stretches of tough, easy, or medium difficulty holes can lead players through their round, either positively or negatively. The routing should be an exploration of the land that utilizes inherent greensites, teeing areas, and holes that emphasize the continuity of the golf course from beginning to end. Some areas may lead to longer holes while others provide quirky turns and configurations; the critical aspect is to relate to the site and provide for a unique experience.

A balance of shots and holes on a course with variety in the lengths and features is a good start to routing, but you can't just order holes from a menu and expect them to have good rhythm and flow. Consideration of the relationship between sequences of holes, not just individual holes, will be most important to developing a good rhythm and flow. And how the holes tie together to form a greater whole is essential to developing continuity throughout the round. Good routings relate the strategy of the golf holes to the natural landscape and its visual cues.

STRATEGY

The landscape can provide the natural siting of feature elements. Better rhythm and flow can result by using existing creeks, dunes, lakes, rock, prairie, etc. to tie the strategy of the golf holes into the landscape more naturally. Great strategy takes its lead from the landscape and responds to it, rather than forcing the design onto the land.

Strategy looks for variety among the par three's, four's, and five's in their length and orientation. Good rhythm and flow requires different lengths of holes to be successful but it can often be ruined by a "need for more yardage on the scorecard" mentality that leads many clubs to add yardage to a course because they physically can, not necessarily where it will retain or improve the rhythm and flow. Don't add yardage just to pump up your scorecard.

Keeping the long holes long and the short holes short when they work will reinforce the positive nature of a course with good rhythm and flow.

Courses often erroneously add 30-50 yards to a short par four, thereby taking away a reachable par four from the weaker player while not affecting the play of stronger players. Allowing half par holes, those holes that typically play harder or easier than their stated par, to remain will lead to better rhythm and flow and combat technology by forcing golfers to think instead of just ripping away at the ball pointlessly.

VISTAS AND SCENERY

The landscape of a golf course can be used to maintain continuity throughout the course with consistent vegetation. Good rhythm and flow will space spectacular vistas periodically throughout the round as emotional and aesthetic highlights. Views between holes can present subtle glances of other parts of the course or foreshadow placements of upcoming pins for the observant golfer. Open areas can improve camaraderie among fellow golfers as they pass each other on the course. Vistas can also return back to a major landform or view it from another perspective, reinforcing the impact of that feature and improving the continuity of the golf course.

Courses with excellent rhythm and flow have sequences of holes that relate to one another through common themes or landforms, such as a string of holes that all use the same valley or share a view. The “south plateau” at the Kingsley Club is an undulating landscape with a deep sinkhole in the middle of it; it is a special piece of land that makes the sequence from the second tee to the seventh tee a memorable experience. Or, there might be a series of short par fours that look innocuous on the scorecard but have some bite in reality, like the fifth through seventh holes at Crystal Downs.

There is a fine line to being able to flow from one section to the next without forcing a change on the golfer too abruptly. Golf should be a natural progression from one hole to the next. The use of open vistas or confined glances upon other holes, followed by a different orientation to a recurring spot, will interject change, yet still transition, from one hole to the next.

NATURAL FEATURES

A common thread among these elements of the rhythm and flow of the golf course is that their use relates to the natural landscape of a site. The strategy of the holes takes its cues from the land and influences the routing sequence, while the vistas are used to reinforce the relationship of the holes and the routing for continuity throughout the round. If these factors balance each other and use the natural landscape to relate to one another effectively, they produce a rhythm and flow that contributes to excellent and enduring golf.

Courses that utilize the contour of the ground, wind, vegetation, vistas, and soils of a site can give a course its rhythm and flow. Sometimes, this is done so seamlessly that golfers don't realize why they enjoyed a course so much, yet it often happens on Donald Ross courses where the elements combine to create endlessly fascinating golf. Ross was a genius at laying a course on the land and letting the natural flow of the property dictate where and how the holes were routed, and allowing that to be the centerpiece of the course instead of elaborate amenities.

Good rhythm and flow follows the landscape and flows along with it, not against the grain. The natural path that one would take to discover a landscape is the one that has a natural rhythm. Great courses will flow downhill,

into a valley, over a gorge, in and out of trees to open grassland, uphill to a plateau, and across the compass in the process of exploring the land. Good rhythm and flow meanders like a stream and returns to the predominant feature in the landscape to maintain continuity and emphasize the attributes of a site. Just think of the great golf courses that effortlessly go from one landscape environment to another and enhance the round of golf. Pebble Beach is a good example of this; it starts away from the ocean and goes to it, rising up, wave-like, to the sixth green perched on a plateau above the crashing surf, followed by the short drop-shot 7th. The eighth, ninth, and tenth play alongside the ocean before the course turns back inland for some wonderful golf through trees and over barrancas, then culminates in the oceanside finish.

Courses that use seemingly innocent land features might be the epitome of good rhythm and flow. The Valley Club of Montecito uses two small hills very effectively in a multitude of ways: first as a green setting at its base, then as a teeing ground, next as a sideline of a hole, then as a green setting, and once again as a tee. It is simple and yet the simplicity reinforces the basic tenets of good design by returning to the main landscape feature again and again.

WALKABILITY

Good rhythm and flow is walkable and flows to the rhythm of walking – it is on a human scale and responds to the landscape. Carts may allow us to transcend more severe sites, but that can often break up the rhythm – hit it, step on it and go, hit it, step on it and go, ... – with no reflection between shots or at select moments in the round. An important part of an enjoyable game of golf is the time to think about the challenge and nature that surrounds you, not just rushing about the course like we do in our regular, over-scheduled lives. Small elevation changes to get to tees that allow reflection are great ways to break up any “hill climbing.” Western Gables does this brilliantly on holes five through thirteen with a quick backstep to an oceanside dune ridgetop, from where the previous hole, current hole, and ocean are all visible. The linear arrangement of holes with similar tee sitings compounds the great flow and continuity of this sequence. The thrill of standing exposed to the elements as you try to conquer the hole before you is exhilarating every time.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Courses with good rhythm and flow work with the most natural holes on the property and enhance them by getting to a stretch of good flow as directly as possible. The Kingsley Club does this with a big, par five opener that allows golfers to warm up with three full shots, followed by a glance at the adjacent fifth green on the short climb to the second tee, whence the second through sixth holes are laid out before you. The second is a short pitch along a ridge to a well-protected green. In the process of going to the third tee, you walk around the fourth green, a huge double bowl, and get a glimpse of the day's pin position, which can be obscured by the roll in the approach. The third and fourth occupy some rumpled terrain and offer a number of options for creative shot-making. The fourth tee looks directly down on the sixth green, previewing that hole for you, and then orients you back towards the ridgetop second and hollowed fourth green from a new angle. The fifth tee shares space with the third tee and turns you back towards the second tee, challenging you to remember where the pin is located on its punchbowl green. Then it is the short walk back up to the sixth tee, which shares its location with the second, but goes in another direction. Finally, from the seventh tee, you get one last look at the “south plateau” before looking ahead at the last three holes of the front side and descending down the hill to an entirely different feel in the sheltered valley of the seventh's landing area. This sequence of holes utilizes the natural rim of the land formation to work holes to and from its many features, re-orienting the golfer to the same position but from a different vantage point

– what a great way to experience a dynamic landscape!

Crystal Downs has one of the best rhythm and flows on a golf course and brings us back to our theatrical analogy. The overture is the anticipation as one stands on the first tee, preparing to do battle with the elements which so often are blasting directly into your face, as you gaze upon the front nine with Crystal Lake and the hills in the distance. The first act is the front nine, one of the great nines in golf, rambling over rumbled ground and challenging every aspect of your game before culminating at the ridgetop par three ninth, next to the pro shop and looking back on the same view that you had to start the day. Act two of the round is a drive off a high precipice at the tenth and then enters the woods on the eleventh tee. This act reaches its pinnacle at the green of the short fourteenth with its view of Lake Michigan's shoreline. The final act takes one by surprise, as you enter the woods for a short stroll from the sixteenth green to the seventeenth tee, you suddenly emerge looking down a narrow corridor of trees at a wildly undulating landscape with a green 311 yards away and a view to Lake Michigan in the distance. The sight is something to behold and has left many a first-time visitor speechless with regard to how to play the hole and the beauty of the scene. This crescendo is heightened even further by the climax at the seventeenth green, where the wind whips across the target and the landscape opens up with views of Crystal Lake and portions of the front nine. The postlude is the eighteenth, with its high tee and play in a natural valley to an amphitheater below the quaint English cottage clubhouse and other private cottages. It is complete – a masterpiece that will always leave the golfer with more to experience next time.

CONCLUSIONS

Good rhythm and flow can mean good golf; combined with wonderful views can make for a great experience. If you add in unique and great holes, you have great golf. A golf course with poor rhythm and flow will lack continuity, progression, or sustained enjoyment.

The golf course that naturally flows across the landscape, combines the landforms and unique features of a site into the strategy of the holes, and uses the visual relationships of the round is a course with great rhythm and flow. Any course that is successful in producing this quality will provide an endless amount of variety that will endure throughout a lifetime of playing.

Good rhythm and flow can make a golf course a truly wonderful and fulfilling experience that is exciting time and time again, making for a lifelong fascination with the game and its playgrounds. Think about rhythm and flow and how it makes your round and course a fascinating day . . .