



Spectators and players alike enjoyed faster play at Muirfield

Speed it up, please

The 2002 Open was the quickest Major for years. It seems that slow play is finally being tackled

> A two-day conference on slow play at St Andrews... rather dull to some, but not to me. If ever there was a problem that needed to be tackled, this was it. How many of us have the patience to watch a golfer dithering forever over his next stroke? In the Qatar Masters in Doha, I saw an Australian professional take 10 practice swings before a relatively straightforward bunker shot.

On arriving at the Old Course Hotel it was clear that the conference was not mirroring the subject matter. It was running to time. At 9am, precisely, David Pepper, the chairman of the R&A's championship committee, launched into an opening address in which he named Bobby Locke, Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus as three of the guilty men.

Locke, said Pepper, took an eternity to study his putts and was responsible for the first of the three-hour rounds. Palmer wriggled in and out of a glove before and after every shot and, in no time at all, every one of his fans was doing the same.

As for Nicklaus, he started pacing shots out instead of being content to see them in his mind's eye. Others followed suit. And then they started studying those stroke-saver booklets and comparing notes with their caddies.

Pepper also told the salutary tale of how, at the last Ryder Cup, John Paramor, the PGA European Tour's chief referee, had summoned the players for a meeting at which he spelt out the pace of play policy.

When this highly-respected official announced that an absolute maximum of five hours and eight minutes had been allowed for

the fourballs, Bernhard Langer reacted with uncharacteristic speed, but only to say that it was not long enough.

I had noticed from the literature handed out at the door that the main speaker at the conference was an American called Bill Yates. That, surely, was a little rich. There would be older members of the R&A to whom the very idea of having someone from the land of the everlasting fourball trying to solve the problems of slow play would have been no less preposterous than inviting a woman to join their beloved club.

Yet it became immediately obvious that this particular American – a management consultant by trade who had brought

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his expertise to bear on the game he loved – was going to give his audience a few useful ideas.

To start with, he suggested that people looking for the causes of slow play were often too quick to heap all the blame on the players. He mentioned other likely causes for the malaise, including inappropriate course design. He knew of one 6,132-yard long course in America to which you could add a further 5,160 yards... for the distance between greens and tees.

He opted for overcrowding as having the biggest impact of all on pace of play. Clubs, he said, had got to find a happy medium

just a thought

between cramming as many people as they could on to a course and cutting down on numbers to allow for the kind of congestion-free round which would have people coming back for more.

Over the two days Yates threw in a number of interesting asides. For instance, that a higher handicap player will take longer to get to the green whereas the championship player will take longer with their putting.

What with all the goings-on at Augusta this year, the R&A seemed, if inadvertently, to go out of their way to let it be known that they were as mindful of the women's game as they were of their own.

David Rickman, in giving a talk on the speed of play at last year's World Team Championships in Kuala Lumpur, said that the women were the more cooperative when asked to get a move-on. The only thing the men understood was being put on the clock.

Pepper added that while women pros are slower than their amateur counterparts, in the men's game those roles are reversed.

I could understand why the R&A wanted to draw attention to the fact that the 2002 Open at Muirfield had been the fastest Major in years. No-one had given them an iota of credit for it at the time for, as Pepper ruefully implied, the press would have been far more likely to write about the pace of play had things ground to a halt.

SETTING THE PACE

With Yates lending advice, they had the players going off at 11-minute intervals, while a further five-minute gap was added every 13 matches. Though the European Tour, which has excelled in knocking 15 minutes off the professionals' rounds in the last six or seven years, still put the emphasis on keeping up with the match in front, Yates dwelt more on keeping the 11-minute interval in place all the way.

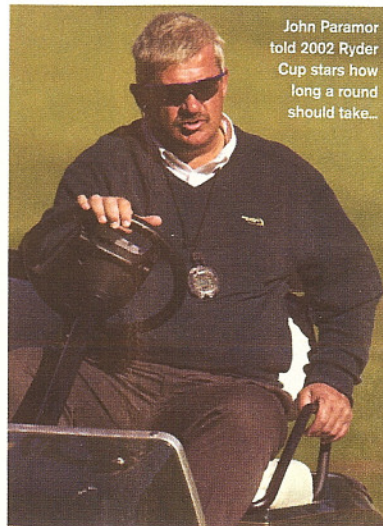
On the first day at Muirfield, rounds took an average of four hours and 30 minutes. On the second, just four minutes longer. Intriguingly, Yates came up with appropriate graphs to demonstrate that play speeded up towards the end of the second day.

Why? Because there comes a time when players realise that they are not going to make the cut and their over-riding ambition at that point is to get out of the place as soon as possible.

In the two-balls over the weekend, the Saturday rounds averaged out at three hours and 52 minutes (in dreadful weather), while the Sunday outings worked out at 24 minutes less.

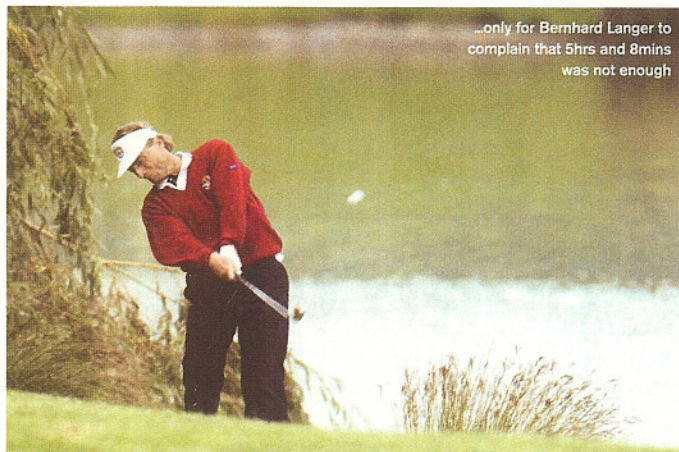
So who benefits from speeding things up at the Open? I suspect the spectators are the main beneficiaries on the grounds that play suddenly becomes so much more watchable. Others cited the press and the television people.

Yates nodded at all of this before pointing to what it meant to the players. Where, in the past, the afternoon starters would have been perfectly entitled to complain that the morning starters had nipped round in four and a quarter hours as against their five and three-quarter hours, morning and afternoon times were now more in step. At Muirfield, no-one had to endure a five-hour round.



John Paramor told 2002 Ryder Cup stars how long a round should take...

Women at the World Team Championships were more cooperative when asked to get a move on



...only for Bernhard Langer to complain that 5hrs and 8mins was not enough

There will, of course, be continuing problems at St Andrews because of the double greens and the players being too polite to putt out on one end while another group are holing out at the other. However, the suspicion is that when 2005 comes around, they will forgo some of the favoured pin positions on the first couple of days in order to make it easier for two sets of players to putt in tandem.

I think it was Yates who, having reminded his roomful of officials of what they already knew about the Open draw being rigged, said that slow players were nowadays taken into account.

"No one with a reputation for slow play goes out near the beginning of either half," he said. "And if two slow players end up being drawn together, we leave them together. That way, the officials can concentrate on them."

That sounded like an excellent idea and it was one which struck a chord with a Welsh visitor who explained how they have sorted things out along much the same lines at his club. On medal days, members make a note on their scorecards of the time they start and finish. The secretary soon identifies the slow ones, who are then told that they cannot choose a morning starting time and must go out at the end of the day.

Though, as has been said, allowances might always have to be made at St Andrews, there is no question that officials at every level are making an admirable fist of putting things to rights.

Fast-forward to 10 years from now and slow play might no longer be providing the journalists with so much in the way of good bad news.