Course setup and the women's game

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Setting up a golf course for a high level competition is a curious subject. It seems that some can get married to a number – a yardage goal – and forget that each golf course has it's own individual nuances that make a yardage goal a poor milestone to use. More important is a performance goal that fairly tests the players.

As with talking about the Rules of Golf, saying that golf "is different" needs to be part of the conversation when it comes to course set up. We aren't playing on a basketball court or a football field with consistent dimensions. Each golf course has it's own type of grass, it's own landscape, it's own greens with undulations or flat spots all existing within varying temperatures, weather and wind directions. Each course has a yardage that makes sense for the field playing it.

A particular hole may have a complicated green complex that the architect intended players to approach with a high shot made with a short iron. If we get stuck on yardage and don't set up the hole the way it was meant to be played then we have failed as

tournament officials. A hole with a green like that should be set up from the green backwards and not the other way around.

If we want the players to approach a green with a club no longer than an 8 iron then we need to go to that distance in the fairway where the average player would be. It will be a different place depending on whether it is a men's or women's event and then work back towards the teeing ground.

Whether the average player in the field hits drives 250 yards or 300 yards, we work back to the teeing ground that makes the most sense for that field. This mindset is imperative when setting up a golf course for the female golfer and we need to just let the numbers add up to what they are and not be handcuffed by a yardage goal.

Last year at the U.S. Open, the USGA got it right but not without some thought changes along the way. They had a goal of having both the men and women hitting the same clubs into the same greens. They started with the idea of playing the women's setup at Pinehurst No. 2 at 700 yards shorter than the men, then they changed to 900 yards shorter and finally ended up playing it a full 1,100 yards shorter after getting valuable data from caddies during practice rounds.

It was illuminating and it became obvious that they had been setting up championship golf courses for women too long for quite some time.

Here at the KPMG Women's PGA Championship at Westchester Country Club in Rye, N.Y., the PGA of America and the LPGA are working together to set up this golf course to fit the field. It will play at 6,670 yard – par 73 this week and it played at only 6,752 for the men's Barclay's Championship in 2007 but with a par of 71. Holes 12 and 15 are being played as par 5s.

This adjustment means the right club is in the hands of the women as they approach some of the more difficult greens but when asked about how his setup differs from regular LPGA events, Stacy Lewis remarked "Yes, this set up is much more similar to a USGA setup I would say, especially the length of some of the par 4s, that's the big difference of what you're seeing. But it's also got some good holes where you can make birdies and things like that. So it's not the brutal test of a U.S. Open with the long rough and everything. So if you get going on this golf course, you can score well. But there's a couple holes you just hit it to the middle of the greens and move on."

The female golf game is different than the men's. Not lesser than, not inferior to but different. A lower trajectory, less distance because of upper body strength and a ball flight less likely to carry spin on the golf ball are all parts of the game that make setup for the women's game an added challenge. Length of the course isn't the only consideration. Each course has it's own peculiarities.

When asked if the course set up had the right club in her hand, Stacy Lewis said, “They are long. But there are run ups. The best way to say it is if you get in trouble there is a way out. If you’re in the rough you can run it up with a hybrid especially because the greens are pitched from back to front. It’s a challenge but there’s a way to get there.”

Will they get it right this week? Tomorrow’s scores will let us know.