

Courses for all

For people with disabilities, a round of golf can be a daunting prospect. *By Design* looks at how golf course architects are working to create a positive golfing experience for all types of player.

Golf courses will naturally vary in difficulty, and some golfers will prefer an easier round, whereas others may enjoy more of a challenge. But none would want to be presented with obstacles to their movement around the course.

For people with disabilities, this can be a common problem. So golf course architects work to ensure that their designs are accessible for people with physical limitations. As well as making golf as inclusive as possible, this approach helps clubs by maximizing the amount of people who can enjoy a round at their courses.

Accessibility was the primary focus for design work when Forrest Richardson, ASGCA, was asked to renovate features and paths at the golf courses at Griffith Park in Los Angeles, California for the Special Olympics World Games in August 2015.

“Participants have a range of special needs, but our focus at Griffith

Park was on making sure that the golf course would be accessible for those with physical limitations,” says Richardson.

“The first step was an inventory of any area where we had problems getting a regular golf cart. We looked at stairways and steep grades. This formed a foundation for developing a plan, and from there we created plans to show every point of access.”

Richardson identifies a number of practical things any golf course architect can do to make their design more accessible to all players.

“One of the simplest things we can do is to remove impediments around tees and greens,” he says. “Many courses have added curbs and borders to cart paths, and often these have no openings where someone with a mobility limitation is able to get through. These curbs also hinder a golf cart from accessing tees and green areas. What we strive for is a 5-foot



wide access area to allow easy access from a path to the tees and greens.”

Combining tee surfaces to a single level is another easy step, according to Richardson.

“By choosing a level where there is little to no grade difference from a path, you are able to provide access to the entire tee area,” he says. “This can also ease maintenance by eliminating slopes from one tee to the next. Sometimes you are not able to provide access to a particular tee. This is the nature of golf across natural terrain. When this occurs, it’s important to make sure there is access to at least one tee on the hole, and to make sure staff know so they can accommodate players who need access.”

Richardson adds that even players who may not consider themselves



Photos: courtesy of City of Los Angeles, Department of Recreation and Parks

Forrest Richardson, ASGCA, made improvements to allow accessibility at the courses at Griffith Park in preparation for the Special Olympics World Games in 2015

disabled need a more accessible course experience.

“In an age when we are seeing more golfers play into their 90s and beyond, I think we owe it to the game to think carefully about how we get people up or down slopes to tees, fairways and greens,” he says. “Practice areas are crucial for access. This is where we can introduce people to the game. There’s simply no excuse for not doing our best to make sure these areas have adequate access without obstacles, steep slopes or narrow openings.”

In Jefferson City, Missouri, Todd Clark, ASGCA, has designed a course specifically for people with disabilities. The Missouri Golf Association hired Clark to design a short course at the Ken Lanning



Golf Center to be fully accessible for disabled people, as well as being suitable for children and beginners.

The nine-hole par-three course features holes of no more than 130 yards, built with artificial turf on flat land with extra wide cart paths that allow players to use wheelchairs all around the course. Greens and tees are also accessible via wheelchair.

In 2016, *Sports Planning Guide* voted the course one of the 10 best adaptive sports facilities in America,

saying: “The Ken Lanning Golf Center believes golf should be a sport for everyone, and since its opening earlier this year, the venue has allowed people with disabilities the chance to enjoy the game like never before.”

Jan Bel Jan, ASGCA, is the secretary of the National Alliance for Accessible Golf, based in St Augustine, Florida.

“The Alliance provides information on the how to incorporate accessibility into golf course design and renovation,” says Bel Jan. “Most



The course at Ken Lanning Golf Center was designed by Todd Clark, ASGCA, to be fully accessible for people with wheelchairs

Photos: Ken Lanning Golf Center

golf course architects provide access for people with disabilities already, through their designs for traditional golfers. This means those golf courses that are inclusionary—family and friends can play golf together with them. Through the Alliance website, golf course architects can learn to help make golf courses they design or renovate more barrier free. They can also learn about programs that club operators can include to encourage participation at the facility by people with disabilities and their families and friends.”

Bel Jan reflects on her experiences at a recent project. “At Pelican Marsh Golf Club in Naples, Florida, a disabled golfer closed his membership at the club because the course became too difficult from what had been the most forward tees at 4,959 yards,” she explains. “He joined a club with an ‘executive’ length that was more favorable to his game, but he missed his friends—and they missed him.”

Once, under Bel Jan’s guidance, Pelican Marsh had installed tees at 4,020 yards for 18 holes, the golfer renewed his membership because the course was now enjoyably playable

for him. He could play from a set of formal teeing grounds with his long-time friends. Bel Jan explains: “The social aspect of golf was enhanced for this golfer and his golf buddies, because they could revive their friendly rivalries!”

Distance is a recurring factor that can make golf courses difficult for new golfers, the less athletic,

for them, regardless of their gender, age or skill level.

“Scoring tees are formal in that they are constructed and maintained as all the other tees, and are built so they appear as always having been a part of the course, even when the course has been retrofitted,” Bel Jan explains. “The design takes into consideration access to the tees with

“The design takes into consideration access to the tees with a power wheelchair or single rider golf cart, slower club head speeds, angle of play and hazards

older players or youngsters, as well as people with disabilities, or the elderly. Bel Jan incorporates accessibility into her own design and renovation work, regularly in the form of ‘scoring tees,’ like at Pelican Marsh, and also Pelican’s Nest in nearby Bonita Springs and Jupiter Island Club on Florida’s east coast. These tees help ensure golfers play a yardage that is fun and challenging

a power wheelchair or single rider golf cart, slower club head speeds, angle of play and hazards. ‘Scoring Courses’ have their own scorecards and are rated by the USGA raters for handicap purposes.” ●

Read more about golf course design projects focused on accessibility at Griffith Park, Pelican’s Nest and the Ken Lanning Golf Center.