

A need for speed?

Pumpkin Ridge pro thinks golf would benefit from a swift kick

By James Achenbach

In October 2005, golf pro Christopher Smith shot 5-under-par 65 in a tournament at Jackson Park Golf Course in Chicago.

Consider this: Smith carried only six clubs.

Ponder this: He played the round in 44 minutes, 6 seconds, an average of slightly less than 2½ minutes per hole.

Smith set a world record that day in the Chicago Speed Golf Classic. Each competitor's final score was determined by adding together the golf score and the time. Smith's magic number: 109.1.

In speed golf, a player runs between shots. He carries a limited number of clubs in a small bag. Divots are replaced, sand is raked, ball marks are fixed and rules are followed. The one exception: The flagstick can be left in at all times.

Smith's score at Jackson Park, the longtime site of the Chicago City Amateur, could have been better. He three-putted three times. He finished the day with six birdies and two eagles without ever taking a practice swing or reading a green. He jetted around the course on what might be called auto pilot, and that, Smith says, is exactly the point.

A teaching professional at Pumpkin Ridge Golf Club in Oregon, Smith has become an advocate for fast play. He does not tell his students to run, but says bluntly that virtually all golfers would play better if they played faster.

"It is the American mindset now that a round of golf is going to take 5 to 5½ hours," he says. "People believe they have to play slowly to play well. I think that's plain wrong."

In the world according to Speedo Smith, golfers play "ready golf" and learn to go with their first instincts on all shots.

"I realized that I was shooting my best scores when I was running," he says. "I asked myself why I was playing so well, and an answer emerged: It's easier to play golf this way, having little time. It turns golf into a reactionary sport, rather than an overanalyzing, contemplative, paralysis-by-analysis sport."

Smith has developed something of a second career based on playing quickly. He conducts demonstrations and exhibitions, and is writing a book on the subject. He also advises golf club



COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER SMITH

Christopher Smith says golf would benefit from shifting from an 'all-day' sport to one that takes only 1-2 hours.

Speed golf

Tips for playing faster:

>> Be decisive. "First impressions are almost always correct," says instructor and speed golfer Christopher Smith. "If you let indecision into your mind, you're dead."

>> Read the break of your putt before it's your turn.

>> If you are riding in a cart, don't waste time replacing your driver (or whatever club you used off the tee) in the bag until after you have driven to the first ball.

>> Convince yourself that you will play better if you play quicker. Give it an honest try. Get an early tee time and try to outdistance the group behind you.

- J.A.

officials on how to efficiently increase play at their courses.

"This slow pace is driving people out of the game," he says. "It's killing the game. Golf has become an all-day sport. It is time to change this. There is a lot of support for changing it."

One solution is to pull golfers from the course if they don't maintain pace. Another is to place a renewed emphasis on the nine-hole round, particularly among beginners.

Because of his experiences, Smith has changed the way he teaches the game.

"I have learned how our unconscious guides these brilliant maneuvers and skills we have, if we allow it to happen," he says. "I believe the adaptive unconscious takes over, and what we must do is keep the all-knowing disruptive side out."

To hasten the learning process, he uses training aids, swing drills and descriptive metaphors to help draw mental pictures of the golf swing.

"You can do it without thinking about it," he says. "That's the way it works best."

Smith also believes in learning these skills away from the course. "If you try to learn it on the course, that's playing golf swing, not golf. Have you built the skill, so you can do it without thinking about it, or have you not built the skill? That's what I ask my students."

He encourages his pupils to play with less than 14 clubs. In speed golf, Smith chooses to carry six clubs: driver, 4-wood, 5-iron, 8-iron, gap wedge and putter.

"It forces me to be creative and use my imagination, to hit golf shots rather than use golf swings," he says. "I really don't know if 14 clubs makes it easier. Often

it's too much to choose from, if you want to know the truth."

Smith, 43, has been competing in speed golf since the mid-1990s. He was born and raised in Eugene, Ore., a hotbed of running activity.

Before Pumpkin Ridge, he was a master instructor at the Jim McLean Golf School at PGA West in La Quinta, Calif., where he was heavily influenced by fellow teacher Jerry Mowlds.

"I think Jerry has a phenomenal gift for seeing things in the golf swing," Smith said. "All the time, he has common-sense explanations that I've never heard anybody say."

Mowlds, a veteran teacher and former PGA Tour player, still can shoot 65, but can he play 18 holes in 44 minutes? No way.

"I am not advocating that people start running on the golf course," Smith says, "but I firmly believe that playing faster can change the game of golf. There are so many benefits." ○