

Golfer Awareness Index: How to be a Good Player, Even if Your Score is High

Most golfers keep a watchful eye on their Handicap Index[®], but there is another index that every golfer should also focus on — the Golfer Awareness Index. This index is based on understanding the fundamentals of the game and how each individual impacts playing surfaces, pace of play, and golfer enjoyment.

BY LARRY GILHULY AND JOHN DANIELS

One of the unique aspects of golf is that players with different skill levels can compete with one another on an equitable basis by using the [USGA Handicap System™](#). A key component of the USGA Handicap System is maintaining a Handicap Index[®], which is portable to any rated golf course at any time. However, most golfers are not aware of an equally important index, the Golfer Awareness Index. This index measures golfer impact on course conditions, pace of play, and the enjoyment of other golfers. Regardless of handicap, all golfers need to be conscious of their Golfer Awareness Index. The following recommendations will help you have a positive impact on the golf course and other golfers. Read on to see if you are a scratch player when it comes to golfer awareness or whether your Golfer Awareness Index could use a little work. As with any round of golf, each hole you play provides an opportunity for improvement.

NO. 1 — SHARE A GOLF CART WITH ANOTHER PLAYER

Golf carts can inflict substantial damage to a golf course, and significant resources are spent mitigating traffic stress and promoting turfgrass recovery so that golfers can enjoy quality playing surfaces. Although there are many strategies for managing the effects of cart traffic, one simple and effective method is requiring golfers to share carts, when practical, rather than take



Golf, the way it should be!



If each player takes his or her own cart, there will be more damage to the golf course.

their own. Not only does this limit the amount of golf cart traffic, it can improve pace of play when players work together to locate golf balls and take turns advancing the golf cart.

NO. 2 — BE AWARE OF NOISE OR MOVEMENT WHEN OTHERS ARE PLAYING

Nowadays, it seems that everyone has a cellphone that can easily play music. Couple a cellphone with a portable speaker and you can listen to your favorite tunes while traversing the links. Many new golf carts even have USB ports to keep these devices powered throughout the day. While some golfers may contend that playing music on a golf course is inappropriate, it can be acceptable as long as it doesn't disturb others. Before playing music, confirm that it will not bother the other players in your group. Also, check with the golf facility for specific policies related to playing music. When playing music, keep the volume to a level that can't be heard by other groups.

NO. 3 — SILENCE CELLPHONES DURING THE ROUND

Do not be the golfer who disturbs everyone with unpredictable cellphone alerts. At a minimum, place your phone on vibrate. It may be even better to

turn off your phone altogether. Who knows? Fewer distractions may help you lower your score. At the very least, keeping your phone silent during the round will help you make more friends in a social setting.

NO. 4 — FINISH YOUR ROUND OF GOLF IN AN APPROPRIATE AMOUNT OF TIME

Pace of play is a hot topic in the golf industry. While many factors influence pace of play, golfers play an important

role. One simple decision, selecting the proper set of tees from which to play, can have a profound positive impact on pace of play and your overall enjoyment of the game. Too often, golfers end up playing from tees that make a course too challenging for their abilities. Part of the problem is that some players think a course has to be long to be fun — nothing could be further from the truth. Pride also is part of the problem, as some golfers put too much emphasis on course yardage instead of their actual score and overall enjoyment.



Playing from forward tees can make golf more enjoyable for beginning golfers and players with slower swing speeds.



When a divot is properly filled, seed will quickly germinate and quality playing conditions will soon return.

NO. 5 — BE AWARE OF TEE DEBRIS

Debris on a golf course can range from garbage that inadvertently misses a trash receptacle to sunflower seeds dropped on putting greens and everything in between. In most cases, debris on a golf course can be attributed to inattentiveness or failure to understand the impact of debris on playing conditions. However, there is one source of debris that almost every golfer uses but few remember to pick up — tees. Broken and undamaged tees can be found on teeing surfaces at virtually every golf course, providing a concrete example of how debris can sometimes take a back seat in the minds of golfers. Do yourself, the maintenance staff, and the mowing equipment a favor: pick up your tee and any other tees lying near it, and reuse them or place them in a trash receptacle.

NO. 6 — ASSIST OTHER PLAYERS WHEN SEARCHING FOR LOST GOLF BALLS

One group that spends an excessive amount of time searching for lost golf

balls can slow down the pace of play on an entire golf course. Part of the responsibility shared by all golfers is to not only watch their own shots, but also those struck by others in the group. There is no question that the odds of finding a golf ball are greatly improved when everyone in the group observes each shot. Also, any player who refuses to help others find a golf ball is not demonstrating good sportsmanship and is failing to play in the spirit of the game.

NO. 7 — REPLACE YOUR DIVOTS OR FILL THEM TO THE PROPER LEVEL WITH DIVOT MIX

Properly fixing ball marks on putting greens is the most important way golfers can impact golf course playability, but fixing divots is a close second. For those who do not believe properly fixing divots is important, ponder the following:

An unrepaired divot will take weeks or months to completely recover. Divots taken from warm- and cool-season grasses with rhizomes or stolons — e.g., bermudagrass,

Kentucky bluegrass, and bentgrass — generally mend the fastest and will show the least amount of surface unevenness. However, unfilled divots in playing surfaces that are primarily comprised of perennial ryegrass, *Poa annua*, or fine fescue can take much longer to recover and can produce long-lasting depressions that impact stance and lie.

Take your time when fixing and filling divots. Usually, replacing a divot is a simple act: find the dislodged turf and replace it, making sure to push the divot back into the scar with your foot to enhance rooting. However, there are several situations in which divots should be repaired by filling the divot with a prepared divot mix. At courses with warm-season grasses and those that deal with crows or other birds that flip divots in search of food, filling divots with some combination of sand, organic material, and seed is common practice. When seed is part of a divot mixture, golfers must take care to avoid contaminating adjacent playing areas comprised of different turfgrass species. For example, a seed mixture intended for creeping bentgrass fairways should never be used to fill divots in the rough.

When using divot mix, it is important to avoid over or under filling divots. Under filling a divot will result in a depression that affects ball lie. If seed is in the divot mixture, under filling a divot can compromise the survival of seedlings due to a lack of protection and moisture retention. On the other hand, overfilled divots will damage mowing equipment. To properly fill a divot, add divot mix until it is even with the base of the adjacent turf. Finally, just as with replacing divots, use your foot to compact the divot mixture. This will provide better soil-to-seed contact to enhance germination and seedling survival. The USGA Course Care video, "[Divot Repair Etiquette](#)" demonstrates the basics of divot repair for both warm- and cool-season grasses.

Take only one divot. There is no reason to take a divot during a practice swing. If you do, make sure to fill it along with the divot taken during your actual shot.

NO. 8 — AVOID OVERLY WET AND DRY SPOTS WHEN DRIVING A GOLF CART

Damage to a golf course can be significant when golfers fail to repair ball marks and divots. However, the greatest damage to a golf course is often caused by golf carts, especially when repeated cart traffic creates severe soil compaction. Carts can also cause serious damage when they are driven through wet or drought-stressed areas. The article "[Letting the Numbers Tell the Story on Cart Damage](#)" quantifies just how much turf damage golf carts actually cause and is a real eye-opener for most golfers.

Many articles have been written about the negative impacts golf carts can have when driven on wet areas. However, immediate damage also occurs when any vehicle is driven over an area that is under heat or drought stress, especially if those areas are comprised of cool-season grasses. As

noted in the article "[Avoid Temporary Memory Loss](#)," areas that show signs of wilt or moisture stress should be avoided to prevent turf damage that will be apparent for several weeks.

NO. 9 — AVOID NATURAL AND ENVIRONMENTALLY SENSITIVE AREAS WHEN DRIVING A GOLF CART

Golf courses provide valuable habitat for numerous plant and animal species. Whether it is a grassy prairie or a wetland, the health of environmentally sensitive areas requires specific management practices. Foot and cart traffic can be devastating to certain species, so care must be taken when searching for errant shots in sensitive areas. As a general rule, golf carts should not enter any naturalized area for any reason. This not only protects the habitat in question, but it also prevents damage to golf carts. Depending on the specific location, searching for

a golf ball in a naturalized area on foot also may not be advisable. Make sure to be aware of any local rules regarding environmentally sensitive areas and obey posted signage.

NO. 10 — AVOID DRIVING OR PARKING ON BARE AREAS NEAR CART PATH EDGES

Careless operation of golf carts can be especially noticeable near curves on a cart path and near putting greens where curbing is absent. In these areas it is common to see golf carts driving or parking off the path and on the turf. Leaving room for other carts to pass is not a good reason for parking off a cart path and damaging the turf. Complete turf loss can occur in areas where carts are routinely driven or parked off paths, so golf balls landing there must be played from bare soil. Do everyone a favor by not cutting corners while driving a cart and park with all four tires on the path.



Driving golf carts on areas that are under drought or heat stress can do as much damage as driving on frost.

NO. 11 — BE AWARE OF PULL-CART DAMAGE

Despite being much smaller and lighter, pull carts can cause damage just like golf carts. Repeatedly walking in the same path with a pull cart causes soil compaction and turf injury that can eventually lead to bare spots. Effort should be made to take unique routes with a pull cart, especially in areas that have a high likelihood of traffic stress, such as around putting greens, tees and bunkers. Avoid using pull carts in tight locations; keep them away from putting greens, collars, and narrow areas between greens and bunkers. For more information on using pull carts, read the article, "[Trolley Follies](#)."

NO. 12 — THOUGHTFULLY ENTER, EXIT, AND RAKE BUNKERS, AND THEN PROPERLY REPLACE BUNKER RAKES

Bunkers require not only special swing techniques but also special golfer etiquette. Golfers must be mindful of how they enter, exit, and play from bunkers to avoid causing damage or personal injury. Always use the lowest point of access when entering a bunker, even if that means taking a slightly longer walk. Most important, avoid entering or exiting bunkers on steep slopes. Try to disturb as little sand as possible when walking in a bunker, and use a nearby rake after your shot to smooth any footprints or imperfections that you create. Some golf courses only rake the bunker floors and keep the faces smooth, so adjust your raking technique according to the maintenance practices at each course you play. After smoothing any imperfections and exiting the bunker, make sure to place the rake parallel to the line of play with the teeth oriented downward on the outside of the bunker, unless instructed otherwise. Before walking away from the bunker, knock any sand off your shoes. Footprints on putting greens already impact ball roll; adding sand to the equation by forgetting to clean your shoes after exiting a bunker only adds to the problem.



Knock the sand off your shoes after exiting a bunker. Otherwise, you may leave sand footprints on the putting green that will impede ball roll and damage mowers.

NO. 13 — CONSIDER PACE OF PLAY WHEN POSITIONING YOUR GOLF BAG OR GOLF CART

Paying attention to where you place your golf bag or park your golf cart can significantly improve pace of play over the course of a round. Be aware of your next destination and park your golf cart or place your golf bag in a position that helps you move in that direction after finishing a hole. Strategically positioning your golf bag or cart

can be the difference between endless backtracking and an efficient round that takes little time to play. The golfers in your group and those playing behind you will certainly appreciate the improved pace of play.

NO. 14 — BE AWARE OF DAMAGE THAT CAN BE CAUSED BY SHOES

Golf shoes are designed to provide stability and support over a wide range of uneven surfaces. However, sure



Dropping a flagstick onto a putting green can leave an indentation that will affect ball roll.

footing comes at a price because aggressive soles can inflict a great deal of damage on putting green turf. Restrictions on metal golf spikes, common at most golf facilities, have undoubtedly helped mitigate much of the damage caused by aggressive golf shoes and led to smoother putting surfaces. However, damage from golf shoes is still a significant concern. Unfortunately, aggressive treads and plastic spikes can be just as harmful as metal spikes if golfers are not careful.

Golfers can help limit the damage from golf shoes by carefully selecting footwear and, more important, walking with care. Walking backward, twisting, jumping, sliding, and shuffling your feet can result in significant turf damage and should be avoided. Once all players in the group complete a hole, any damage caused to the putting green by golf shoes must be repaired.

NO. 15 — CORRECTLY REPAIR YOUR BALL MARK TO CREATE A SMOOTH SURFACE

Golf courses are often judged on the quality of their putting greens because they play such a significant role in the game of golf. The slightest imperfection in a putting green can cause a golf ball to veer off its intended line and miss the hole. As such, golf course maintenance personnel spend a great deal of energy and resources trying to produce smooth and consistent putting surfaces. However, their efforts can quickly be undermined when golfers do not repair ball marks.

The proper technique for repairing ball marks is quite simple and requires only a few seconds of effort. Insert any pointed tool at a 45-degree angle behind the ball mark and gently push the top of the tool toward the center of the ball mark. Continue working

around the ball mark, pushing the surrounding turf in toward the center. Afterward, tamp the area down with your putter. The USGA Course Care video "[How To Repair Ball Marks](#)" provides further guidance.

NO. 16 — CAREFULLY REMOVE AND REPLACE THE FLAGSTICK

When tending the flagstick, make sure your shadow does not interfere with another golfer's intended line to the hole. Also, stand at least a couple of feet away from the flagstick to avoid damaging the area around the hole. Be careful not to hit the edge of the hole when removing and replacing the flagstick. Gently lay the flagstick on the ground, preferably off the putting surface; do not toss or drop it. This is especially important with larger, tapered flagsticks that can dent the putting surface when dropped. Also,

GOLFER AWARENESS INDEX

Situation	Par	Birdie	Bogey
1	Sharing a golf cart with another player	Sharing a golf cart and being prepared for your next shot	Not sharing a golf cart (bogey) and not being prepared for your next shot (double bogey)
2	Awareness of noise and movement when others are playing	Politely asking players in your group if music would be a problem beforehand	Playing loud music without asking others if they mind
3	Cellphone is on vibrate during the round	Cellphone is off during the round	Cellphone use is distracting you (bogey) and the players in your group (double bogey), resulting in slower pace of play
4	Finishing a round of golf in the proper time	Playing from the correct tee markers	Playing from tees too far back for your drive distance and skill level (double bogey)
5	Awareness of tee debris and reusing your tee, if possible	Reusing your tee, if possible, and properly disposing of any other debris that you find	Leaving your tee and others on the ground, resulting in damage to mowers (bogey) and not placing other debris that you find in a proper receptacle (double bogey)
6	Assisting fellow players search for lost golf balls	Watching all shots by all players to provide a better chance of finding errant golf balls	Only watching your shots (bogey) and never assisting others when golf balls are lost (double bogey)
7	Replacing all your divots or filling divots to the proper level with divot mix	Replacing additional divots or filling divots left by others to the proper level with divot mix	Failing to replace divots properly, over or under filling divots (bogey) or doing nothing (double bogey)
8	Following all cart signage when driving a golf cart	Avoiding all overly wet and dry areas when driving a golf cart	Disregarding cart signage or driving through overly wet and dry areas
9	Awareness of natural and environmentally sensitive areas when playing golf	Following all course rules regarding natural and environmentally sensitive areas	Disregarding signage or not paying attention to natural or environmentally sensitive areas
10	Avoiding bare areas near cart path edges when using a golf cart	Driving and parking in the middle of the path	Regularly parking off the path and cutting corners around curves
11	Awareness of pull-cart damage	Always avoiding high-traffic areas when using a pull cart	Taking a pull cart through tight or worn areas near greens, bunkers, and tees
12	Properly entering, exiting, raking, and placing the rake when playing from a bunker and removing excess sand from footwear before walking on a green	Raking footprints and other unsmooth areas left by others and properly placing the rake when you are finished using it	Entering from the wrong area (bogey), not properly raking the sand after playing (double bogey), or not raking at all (triple bogey)
13	Awareness of golf bag or golf cart placement	Placing your golf bag or cart in the direction of the next shot or hole	Placing your golf bag or cart away from the next shot or hole and slowing down play
14	Always picking up your feet when walking on a putting green and avoiding twisting, shuffling, and jumping	Wearing footwear that does not cause deep imprints	Wearing shoes that cause deep imprints (bogey) and then dragging, shuffling, running, or jumping on a green (double bogey)
15	Correctly fixing your ball marks to restore a smooth putting surface	Fixing other ball marks as well as your own	Incorrectly fixing your ball marks (bogey) or not at all (double bogey)
16	Properly removing the flagstick and replacing it without causing damage to the edge of the hole	Carefully laying the flagstick on the green (birdie) or off the putting surface (eagle)	Dropping the flagstick (bogey), using a golf club to pick up flagstick (double bogey), damaging the edge of the hole upon replacement with no repair (triple bogey), leaving a crooked flagstick (quad)
17	Removing the ball from the hole with your hand	Removing the ball and fixing the hole if it is damaged	Removing the ball with your putter and causing damage to the hole
18	Doing all of the above to reduce damage, improve pace of play, and enhance golfer enjoyment	Politely letting others know when they have not followed one of these recommendations	Watching others fail to follow these recommendations and saying nothing (double bogey)



Do not use your putter to remove a golf ball from the hole. You may accidentally damage the perimeter of the hole.

never use golf clubs to pick up a flagstick; they can damage the flagstick and lead to accidental dropping. Finally, when placing the flagstick back into the hole, make sure it is properly seated and straight.

NO. 17 — REMOVE YOUR GOLF BALL FROM THE HOLE WITH YOUR HAND

The fundamental goal of golf is to get your ball into the hole. Once that goal is accomplished, it is important that you carefully remove your golf ball. Damaging the edge of a hole is unacceptable and easily avoidable with a little care. Make sure to only remove a golf ball from a hole with your hand; never try popping it out with the head

of your putter. Should the edge of the hole become damaged, do your best to repair it for other golfers.

NO. 18 — DO ALL OF THE ABOVE TO REDUCE TURF DAMAGE, IMPROVE PACE OF PLAY AND ENHANCE GOLFER ENJOYMENT

The Golfer Awareness Index table provides a scorecard for calculating your Golfer Awareness Index. Hopefully, you will make more birdies than bogies. To truly become a great player, follow these recommendations and let other players know, in a nice way, if you see them making a mistake. What golfers do or don't do impacts the condition of the golf course, pace

of play, and every golfer's enjoyment. Helping everyone follow these recommendations is the best birdie you can get — if you do it more than once, give yourself an eagle.

If you follow the awareness recommendations described in this article, there is no question that your Golfer Awareness Index will be very good. So the next time you tee it, think about the impact individual actions have on playing conditions and enjoyment of the game for fellow players. Doing so will lead to an excellent Golfer Awareness Index and ultimately an improved golfing experience.

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