

Being prepared is key to practicing etiquette and battling slow play

By Barbara Puett and Jim Apfelbaum

Take fair play, sportsmanship and courtesy out of golf, and what've you got? Hockey.

In reading this series of columns on etiquette, don't expect a regular sermon on taking two clubs to the tee and raking bunkers. We'd like, instead, to offer a positive approach to dealing with situations in golf that can often cause confusion, delay and discouragement.

To help stem slow play, golf has relied heavily on what we could call "don'ts." Those "don'ts" underlie a punitive approach that doesn't seem to be working. Slow play, in other words, doesn't need any help from us—it's doing fine on its own, thank you, but maybe it's time to ask why. Here are some possibilities that may not defend slow play, but they do make it more understandable.

There's no way around it—the word "etiquette" just sounds old fashioned. Unhip and uncool as it may be, "etiquette" has served golf well for centuries.

But if the word bothers you, try thinking of it as strategy. Good strategy builds confidence, and confidence comes in part from the assurance of doing the right thing. No one wants to ask which fork to use, for instance.

When you've got your bearings, it's much easier to act decisively. Uncertainty, on the other hand, saps confidence. It also wastes time.

Every weekend, millions of golfers tune in to watch the best players in the land on the field of battle. Every weekend, they also get an inadvertent lesson in slow play. The best golfers in the world routinely play five-hour rounds, in threesomes or even twosomes. What kind of

message do you suppose that sends to the casual player?

Remember, there is golf, tournament golf and professional golf. The pros play as if their livelihoods depended on it, as should be the case. Standing over a ball for several eternities (which we might define as anything longer than five seconds) robs your swing of its natural rhythm. It creates tension and makes your swing more mechanical.

Anyone who can pay a green fee can

play golf. Can we realistically expect those who haven't been properly prepared to know and observe the traditions of the game?

Golf professionals are on the front lines in the battle and have the best opportunity to turn the tide, but pros wear many hats: salesman, employer, teacher, buyer and so on. So it's no wonder the cracks in golf's tradition of etiquette are becoming fissures—even the pros can do only so much. In the end, upholding that tradition is up to the people who play the game.

So keep in mind that the great thing about etiquette, or strategy, is that it works to improve both your game and that of those who share your course, it's inexpensive to learn and it's easy. Anyone, regardless of skill, gender, age, or even a bad hair day, can master it.

To take your first step, remember that the slow play conundrum will begin to get better the moment we recognize it's not someone else's problem. It all boils down to attitude. ●

Barbara Puett and Jim Apfelbaum are co-authors of "Golf Etiquette," now in its third printing from St. Martin's Press.

