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So What's Wrong With Being Slow?

Step One: Our Writer Admits to His Denial About Dithering on the Course, Boggling Down the Pace

By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT
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Hi, my name is JP and I'm a slow player. It's been 10 months since I last played slow. [Applause from the group.] Thank you.



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2011 Sports Illustrated

Ben Crane has speeded up his game; pictured, he takes his fourth shot on the eighth hole during recent play at the Ritz-Carlton golf club, Dove Mountain in Arizona.

It hasn't been easy, and I know I'm not out of the woods yet. I still feel the lure of ambling over to my ball from the cart without taking a club, to get a "feel" for the upcoming shot. I yearn to take second or third looks, from every direction, at the line of my putts. I miss idly musing about the hole just completed and marking my scorecard while still on the green. I loved telling a joke on the tee box when I had the honors and everyone was forced to listen. Good times.

But I'm past that stage now. I'm strong. I resist. I'm playing faster, faster, faster, thanks to the support I've found in this group, and the

stream of slow-play warning letters I received from the Committee at my course.

Those letters are a disappointment and a puzzlement, since I've worked so hard at picking up the pace. I've completely given up plumb bobbing, for example, and I no longer carry a ball retriever.

Frankly, I think it's a personality thing. Our head pro has had it in for me ever since that incident two years ago, when I tried to reason with him about my need to take three practice swings before every shot. "One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, then go, cat, go," I explained. The swings were an essential part of my pre-shot routine. They propelled me, like a cyclone wind, directly into part B of my pre-shot routine, the part I did standing over the ball.

But he wasn't listening. I think he was distracted by the foursomes piling up behind us as I insisted on demonstrating both parts A and B of my routine, along with my pre-pre-shot ritual, in which I closed my eyes and took a series of deep, cleansing breaths. The more careful and meticulous I am with each shot, I argued, the fewer shots I'll need overall, which translates into faster play. In the end, I believe, we both got our points across that day, his punctuated by banning me from playing before 1 p.m. until I proved I could clock a four-hour round.

I can't deny that I used to be a slow player. Dial-up slow. Course rangers sometimes offered me double money back to leave the premises. It's not true, however, as some have suggested, that I once lost a ball in the rough when the grass grew over it as I pondered my options.

The funny thing is, the pace I played at back then never seemed slow to me. On the contrary, I always felt rushed. I regularly read the golf magazines and watched the tip shows on Golf Channel. That's a lot to sort through before each shot. The toe-tapping vultures forever standing behind me on the fairway, fists on their hips, looking all exasperated, just didn't understand.

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Slow play, in my view, was any play slower than the pace at which I wanted to play. By that criterion, I wasn't playing slow at all.

But now, thanks to step four of 12 in our program (that's the "searching and fearless moral inventory" business), I can see that I was in denial. The slower I played, the slower I wanted to play, to get everything even more right. The addictive illusion of slow play is the promise of perfection, and I was powerless to resist it.

I was also blind to the repercussions of my obsession for those on the course behind me. Okay, so maybe the pace that some people prefer amounts to cart polo rather than golf, but the course is something we all have to share and I'm attempting to do my part. I've tried to make amends, as per step eight, to others for all the harm and mental anguish I caused along the way. David A., if you're out there, I'm particularly sorry about your forehead stitches. True, it was you, not I, who actually did the head pounding with the putter, but I know my dithering was the cause.

Although in a way I hate to admit it, I'm scoring better now that I've picked up the pace. All those practice swings and deep thoughts about proper left-wrist pronation only made me more self-conscious and less instinctive. If Ben Crane, once one of the most notoriously slow players on the PGA Tour, can speed up his game and play even better, there's hope for me.

Thanks to everyone who sent me copies of "The Return of the Four Hour Round," by Patrick Mateer (fourundergolf.com). Did you know that golfers categorize 56% of all others golfers as slow, but only 2% regard themselves that way? There are lots of little tricks in that book on speeding up play, most of them just a matter of thinking ahead a bit and being ready to hit when it's your turn. As Mateer points out, speeding up just 10 seconds per shot in a foursome can knock an hour or more off the time it takes to play a round. Four hours does seem to be about the right balance between the deliberators, like me, and the speed demons, like the Presidential Bush clan.

I haven't broken the four-hour barrier yet, but I'm working on it. Last week a group I was in finished at four hours and 10 minutes, and if it hadn't been for this other guy taking so many practice swings, we'd have made it for sure. I'm proud to report that the warning letters from the Committee have mostly stopped, and a few people recently have voluntarily asked me to join their foursome. It's a miracle! I owe it all to this group.

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About John Paul Newport

An avid golfer himself, John Paul Newport has written the weekly Golf Journal column since June 2006. Before joining the Journal, he was executive editor of Travel+Leisure Golf for two years. He previously worked as a widely published freelance writer, and during the 1980s was a staff writer for Fortune. He started his career in Texas at his hometown newspaper, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram.

Mr. Newport is the author of "The Fine Green Line," an account of his year spent competing on pro golfs mini-tours in an effort to qualify for the PGA Tour, published in 2000 by Broadway Books. He graduated from Harvard.

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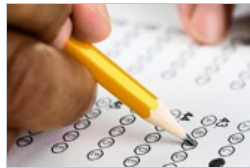
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