According to data from The National Golf Foundation, participation in the game of golf in the United States, and especially Michigan, has been flat or declining since its peak in 2003. The number of golfers has dropped by 12.9 percent for one reason or another, and rounds played have dropped by 5 percent. While the data suggests that this shrinking pool of players are actually playing more individual rounds of golf, the challenge is daunting: How do we make golf more fun and bring that 12.9 percent back into the game? And more importantly, how can we help make that “one or two rounder a year” into an avid golfer?

Is Boosting Participation Doable ... and Realistic?
I believe it is possible to make golf more fun and boost participation. As golf icon Jack Nicklaus said at the 2011 PGA Merchandise Show in Orlando: “I love this game but our industry is at a crossroads. It will take a combined effort to put us back on the road to growing participation in golf ... but with some out-of-the-box thinking, here is a good place to start.”

What Nicklaus is talking about are two overlapping initiatives under way — supported by a partnership between the PGA of America and the USGA. Both are designed to help make golf a more fun and enjoyable game: “Golf 2.0” which is meant to expand participation and build the vitality of the game for future generations; and “Tee it Forward,” a program that encourages golfers to play the tee area that best suits their game.

Both of these national initiatives are critical to the big picture and future health of the game. But, in my opinion, at the grassroots level, the two most important issues are: Get rid of gender on the golf course, and help golfers understand which tees will create the most fun! If we can accomplish those items, I firmly believe more people will play and stay in the game.

Become UN-patriotic ... Stop Seeing Red, White, and Blue
Years ago the USGA Handicap Manual referred to Blue, White, and Red — the colors in the flag — as the usual color for club tees. No longer! The USGA wants to erase all sense of gender-bias to tees. Let’s face it, men — and especially senior men — will not play from red tees, even if that yardage is best suited for their game.

To the stubborn male, especially the stubborn senior male, red means one thing — women’s tees. It never ceases to amaze me how much emotion and misconception comes when you start trying to get golfers to play from tees best suited to their game. Senior men will even play from a tee box forward of the red tees, just to avoid the stigma of playing from the “women’s tees.”

To help players have more fun and create a more enjoyable experience, it would be smart for every golf course to get rid of red — or at least change its location. South Carolina leads the nation with courses that use red as the back tees.

Golfers who ‘Tee it Forward’ just might play more often. After all, birdies are more fun than double bogeys.

A Journey Too Far
Golf is a competitive game, both against others and against ourselves. The overriding feeling when you step to the first tee is hope; hope that today will be the round of your life. As decent human beings and friends, we try to help each other — to give encouragement and to make things more enjoyable. But do we do this for ourselves? The answer is usually “No!”

It makes sense that to better enjoy the game, we should try to make it a tad bit easier and less frustrating. And maybe even making our wives or girlfriends a little happier by shortening the time it takes to play.

Here’s Another Fix
In a perfect world — and to make sure everyone enjoys the game and has the most fun — people would learn to play golf before they play golf. We know that’s not going to happen. I watch players on the first tee at my home course, TPC Michigan, starting their round from the back tees. I just scratch my head as their drives slice into the trees on the right side of the first fairway, and wonder: How can that be fun?

Because golf is our avocation not our vocation, we are at a disadvantage before we
... last year the average tour player hit his drive around 290 yards while the typical amateur — who by the way is not consistent — hit it less than 225 yards.

But that’s only the beginning of the story. Even if Tiger Woods and I were at the same distance from the green he would be pulling at least three clubs less than I would. Is it easier for you to get a wedge or a 7-iron closer? While most of us hackers (and I am) hit a 7-iron on a good shot around 140 yards, the typical pro launches it 170 yards or more. In other words, on a par 4, we are giving up approximately 95 yards in two swings.

What’s wrong with this picture? It’s no wonder casual players hit so few greens in regulation and rarely get the ball close to the hole on approach shots. It’s like letting an NBA player shoot from the free-throw line while the amateur has to shoot from outside the arc.

Playing the “Ego” Tees

Wouldn’t you want to have the same club as a professional in your hand when you hit your approach shot to the green? But there is still resistance to move up to the correct set of tees, and the real culprit here is EGO.

The often-stated reason average golfers don’t play from 6,000 yards (the approximate distance a person who drives the ball 225 yards should play from) is that it makes the game “too easy.” While the game of golf has many descriptors, “too easy” is certainly not one of them.

If I’m truthful with myself, the best moments in golf I have are usually on easier courses with good friends. I can plan the shots I hit and play within my abilities. That doesn’t mean I won’t progress or my game won’t get better. It just means that I know where I am with my game today and I can stay within myself.

How much more sense could “Tee it Forward” make? Arnold Palmer says golfers get more joy from an attempted birdie putt than from any other shot in golf. So why not give yourself more birdie chances? If I owned a golf course I would want more birdie chances for my customers with shorter rounds. And owners may find that golfers who “Tee it Forward” just might play more often. After all, birdies are more fun than double bogeys.

Golf is a unique game, much different from other sports. It is this difference — this sense of individual honesty, sportsmanship, integrity, and honor — that we must protect and grow. But we must recognize the work ahead as the game faces an ever-changing world. From the cost and time required to play to the environmental impact the game has, our commitment to not just sustaining, but also growing the game will continue. Thanks for supporting amateur golf and being a member of the Golf Association of Michigan.

### TEE IT FORWARD GUIDELINES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Driver Distance</th>
<th>Recommended 18-Hole Yardage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>275</td>
<td>6700 – 6900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250</td>
<td>6200 – 6400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>225</td>
<td>5800 – 6000</td>
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<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>5200 – 5400</td>
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<tr>
<td>175</td>
<td>4400 – 4600</td>
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<tr>
<td>150</td>
<td>3500 – 3700</td>
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<tr>
<td>125</td>
<td>2800 – 3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>2100 – 2300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### DATA FROM THE TEE IT FORWARD PILOT PROGRAM - July 5-17, 2011

- 70% of golfers found playing more enjoyable with Tee It Forward
- 47% felt they played faster
- 91% are likely to use it again
- 52% stated they were likely to play more golf because of Tee It Forward

### ALTERNATE METHOD TO FIND YOUR CORRECT TEES

Average 5 iron distance (you must be truthful) x 36 = correct yardage

Mine is: 170 (my average 5 iron distance) x 36 = 6120 yards.

- This yardage will usually give me a short iron approach shot on 2 or 3 holes
- Sometimes a par 4 that’s almost drivable
- The ability to hit my approach closer to the hole
- More birdie opportunities

### WILL MY HANDICAP INDEX STILL BE VALID FROM FORWARD TEES?

Your total score is usually going to be lower by playing from a shorter set of tees, but the ratings are also going to be lower to compensate for the difference. So the Handicap Index and Handicap Differential you produce from each round played should be about the same and keep a Handicap Index valid from tee to tee, and course to course.