

Golfer Perception of Trees on Golf Courses

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Abstract

With the exception of true “links-style” golf courses, trees are an important component of most golf course landscapes. While trees can significantly affect speed of play, quality of the golf experience, and the health of golf course turf, they are often mismanaged or neglected by golf course management. Golfer perception of turf quality (green speed, rough grass height, tee surface quality) often drives turf management decisions made by the golf course superintendent. If golf course managers better understood golfer perception of and appreciation for golf course trees and their health, the care of golf course trees may gain greater priority in golf landscape



management plans. We could find no research on golfer perception of golf course trees, so developed a survey to measure golfer attitudes about trees on the golf course. Questions about the architectural, aesthetic and environmental value of trees on the golf course, their effects on speed and quality of the golf experience, and perceptions of tree health were asked of golfers after completing golf rounds. Golfers playing on public fee and private golf courses were included in the survey. Survey results will be shared with state, regional, and national golf course superintendent and club manager associations.

Introduction

With the exception of true links-style golf courses, trees are an important component of most golf course landscapes. As with other types of landscapes, trees are valued on golf courses for their aesthetic beauty, environmental benefits, wildlife value, and for their architectural importance. Research concerning trees on the golf course, and the resulting scientific literature, is largely focused on the effects of shade on turf health and disease occurrence, and the contributions that trees make relative to wildlife habitat and contributions to carbon sequestration on golf courses. Lay print and electronic literature offers opinions by individuals (often architects) on the value of golf course trees from an architectural perspective. While not documented by research, those managing golf course turf generally view trees in an unfavorable light because of the negative effects of shading and root competition on turf health, the labor required to manage tree leaves and other tree debris and continuing need to conduct (or pay for) tree pruning or removal. Recognizing the impacts that trees have on course agronomics and budgets, tree assessments and surveys have become important tree management tools for golf course superintendents (Moeller, 2014; Vavrek, 2014).

While trees impact golf course agronomics, turf health, and management budgets, there appears to be no literature on golfer perception of trees and how trees affect their enjoyment of the game. If architects, golf course superintendents, and others who determine the placement, planting and care of golf course trees better understood golfer opinions of those trees, more attention to placement (or removal) and greater investment in care, management and replacement could result.

Materials and Methods

We developed a survey that could be distributed in-person to golfers on the golf course, or electronically via SurveyMonkey, to measure golfer opinions on how trees affect their enjoyment of the game, pace of play, golf course aesthetics, and the golf course environment. The survey also measured golfer knowledge of the Rules of Golf relative to trees when they affect their ability to strike the ball. Demographic information on age, sex, experience/ability, and type of courses played (private or private) were also collected. The survey is on-going (as of August 2, 2015); statistics have not been performed on any data presented here. It can be viewed online at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/golfersandtrees>

Results

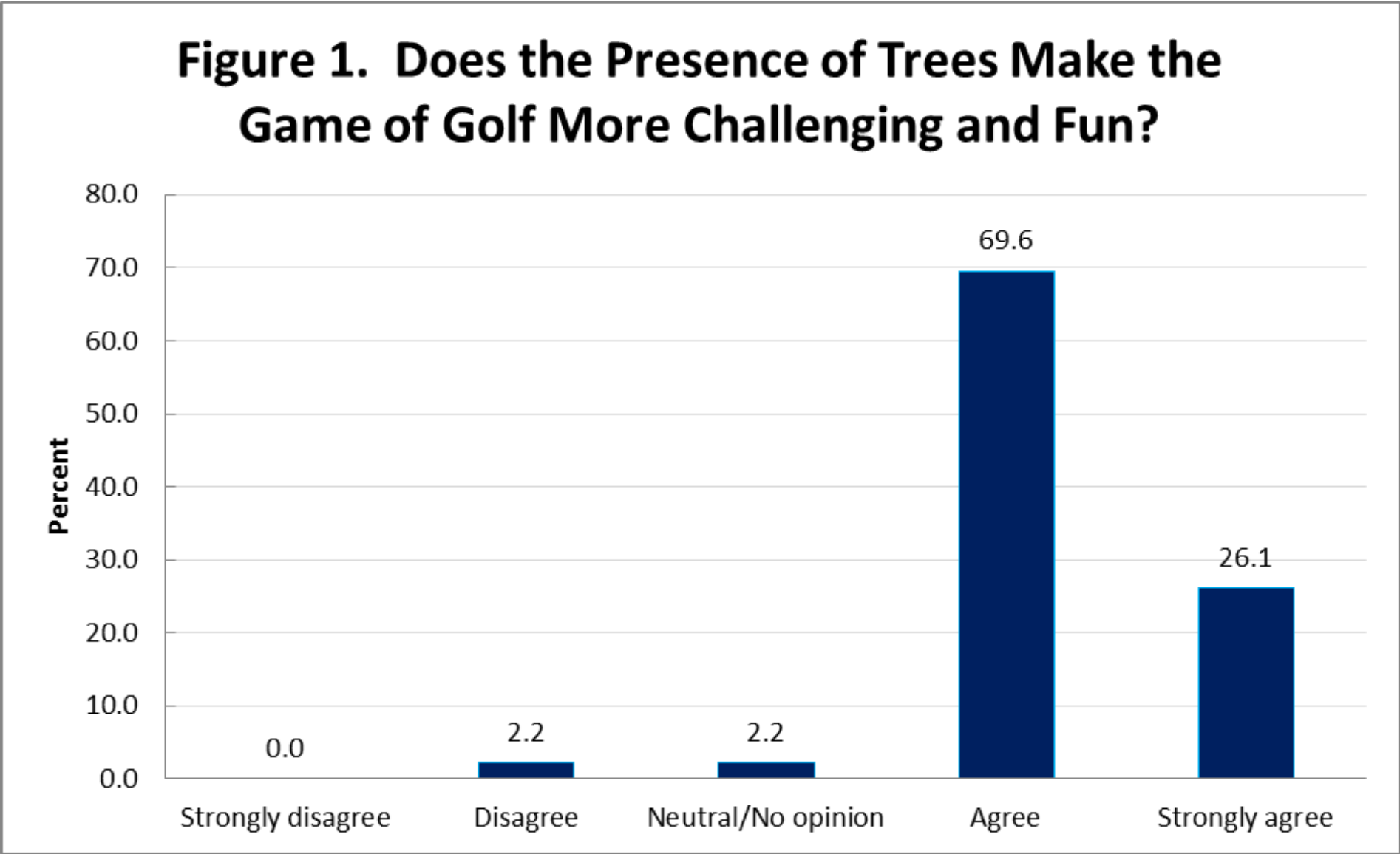
Demographics of Respondents (as of 1 August 2015)

- 56% female; 44% male
- 90% greater than 55 years of age
- 90% have played golf for more than 6 years; 56% have played for 20+ years
- 40% play more than 5 times/month; 97% play at least twice monthly
- 78% play most of their golf on public/municipal courses; only 2% play mostly on private courses

Results

Effects that Trees Have on Playing of the Game

Most respondents (>90%) agreed that trees make the game of golf more challenging and fun (Figure 1), with 62% agreeing that trees make golf more difficult. Interestingly, 13% said that trees often seem to be “in the wrong place” and can make the game less fun. Fallen leaves and other tree debris can make finding the fall more difficult (56% of respondents) and 70% agree that exposed/surface roots can make striking the ball difficult and/or hazardous. While 93% of those responding said that the shade created by trees is important to their enjoyment of the game, 39% agreed that the negative effects of shade on turf density can result in poor lies under/near trees.

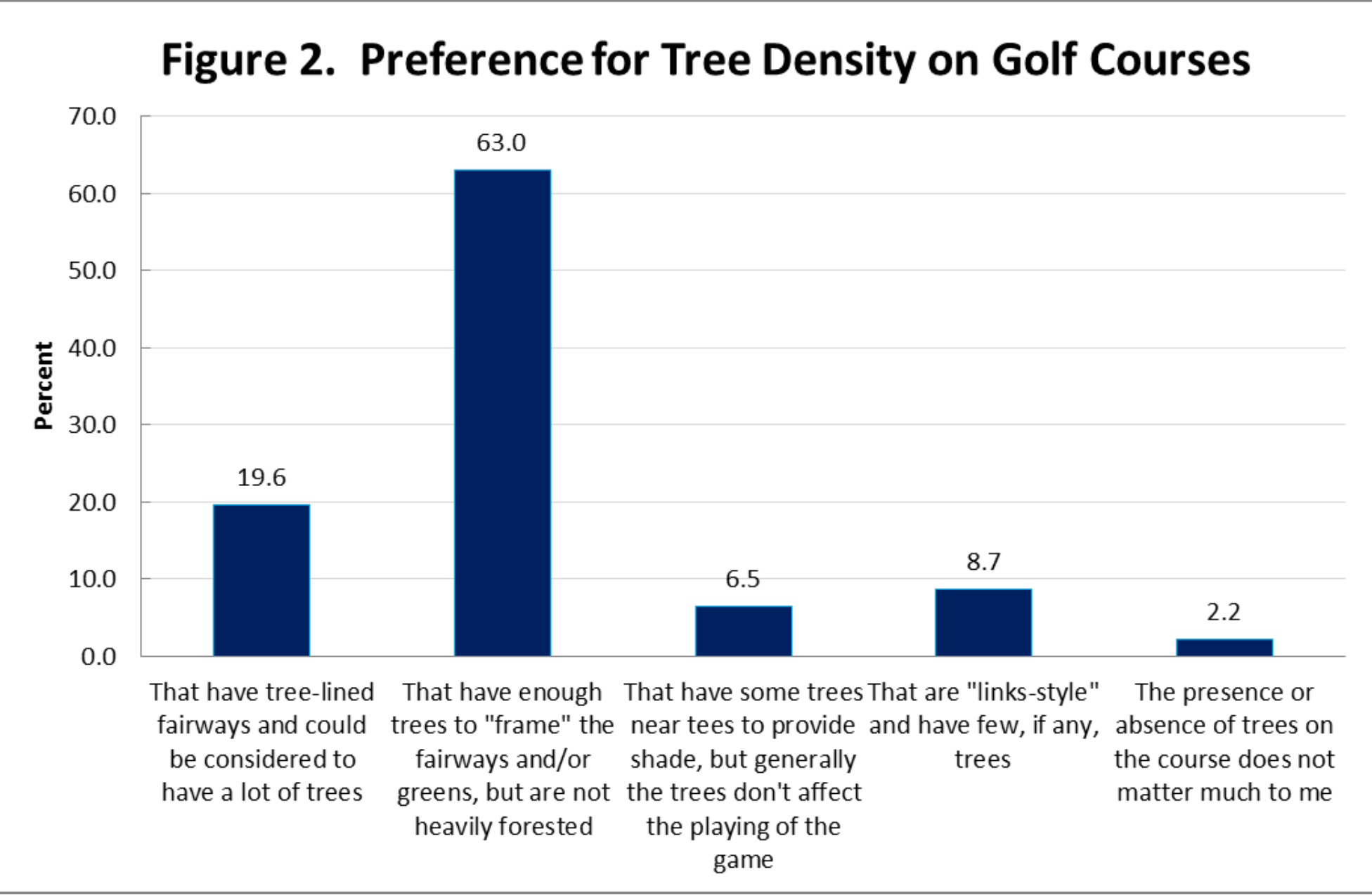


Environmental Benefits and Care of Golf Course Trees

The benefits that trees provide wildlife on golf courses (shelter, food, nesting locations) was recognized by 97% of respondents. Other positive environmental benefits, including reduced runoff and ability to sequester carbon were acknowledged by 95%. Superintendents were viewed as doing a good job in caring for golf course trees by 78% of respondents, and 64% are of the opinion that golf courses should spend more money on the planting and care of trees.

Trees and the Rules of Golf

While the majority of survey respondents could be considered experienced, avid golfers, a surprisingly high number (31%) either incorrectly (or were unsure of) identified the proper ruling of proceeding when a tree obstructed their swing or made it impossible to strike the ball. Only 40% correctly understood the Rules when leaves, twigs or other loose parts of a trees covered the ball or interfered with striking the ball. The results of our survey clearly show that a large percentage of golfers don't understand the Rules when trees come into play.



Preliminary Conclusions

Preliminary findings suggest that golfers value trees on golf courses because they make the game more challenging and fun, and the recognize the environmental benefits that trees provide. Over 90% of respondents to date (Figure 2) prefer playing on golf courses that have trees present, with 8% preferring “links-style” (no or few trees) courses and 2% suggesting that the presence or absence of trees does not matter to them.

Future Work

We are continuing to collect data via SurveyMonkey. One goal is to have state and national golf associations distribute our survey to their memberships. Results will be shared with at our annual regional turf conference and in published form, as well as through our blog: <http://csuhort.blogspot.com>

Literature Cited

Moeller, A. 2014. How trees impact USGA Course Rating™ and Slope Rating®: Tree removals for agronomic purposes are very unlikely to have a significant impact on course rating and slope rating. *USGA Green Sec. Rec.* 52(8):1-3.

Vavrek, R. 2014. The value of a tree survey: High-quality trees are an asset to a golf course, but trees in advanced stages of decline can be a liability. A comprehensive tree survey can help separate the prime wood from the firewood. *USGA Green Sec. Rec.* 52(4):1-4.