

## SIX HUNDREDTHS DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

says John Stobbs in the fifth of his current series of articles.

THE Ryder Cup result, of 20 points to the United States professionals against only 6 to ours, over the six rounds of foursomes, fourballs and singles, has raised again what seems to be becoming a permanent bogey about the condition of British golf.

The one constant factor in all the reports and opinions, from Press and players alike—as indeed it has been after our last two open championships—was conjecture whether the larger American ball might not be the root cause of the difference in competitive ability between the two teams.

Cynics and statistics-wise men dissent, of course, on the simple suspicion that even if the Americans played all their golf with our ball, and we played all our golf with the American ball, they would still win. This, of course, can be neither proved nor disproved. But every argument of mechanics and play stands against it, and in favour of the theory that we could play that 2% more reliable golf which would match them if all our players were forged, in method and temperament alike, upon the 1.68 in. ball instead of the 1.62 in.

The advocates of a British swing to the larger ball cannot prove their point decisively either. But both analysis and opinion seem to be moving their way all the time.

### Masses against?

The whys and wherefores of the argument do not concern us here. But since the vast mass of British ordinary golfers and clubs are still assumed to be against any change, on the simple theory that the British ball goes farther for them than the U.S.A. one, this might be a good moment to take a look at the issue from the greenkeeper's point of view.

Likely differences between play with the 1.62 in. and the 1.68 in ball come under three headings. *First*: the

amount of wear and tear on the courses. *Second*: the possible effect upon the putting-surface problem. *Third*: the possible effect upon course value.

The wear and tear factor might prove to be very telling. Any man can try this for himself. Procure ten American-size balls (of any age), line them up on any well-worn patch of turf (just about where the majority play their shots to the green from would do well, but the practice ground might be wiser!) First, taking all the time in the world, and playing each stroke as if it was one in a normal game, hit each British-sized ball to a green or target. Take a rest for a bit: then think anew about the shot in terms of the American-sized ball; and then strike all of them to the green as well (taking one club more, if the wind is against, perhaps).

### Not so deep

Experiments already tried suggest that for nearly every ordinary golfer this comparison tells its own story. On examination, the line of divot-marks left where the ten American-size balls were struck will be less deep and damaging to the fairway than the line of ten left where the British balls were struck. This: despite the fact that the player will still have been striking them all with the habits he has devised for coping with the smaller ball.

Once a player gets accustomed to the larger ball, and adjusts his striking method to it, he tends to take out far less turf than he does with the British ball, because the American ball sits a little higher on the turf than the British. Even in a tight lie, there is not the same incentive to "dig" for it. The American ball, moreover, rises up into the air much more readily from the face of the club than the British one: so that—quite irrespective of the height at which it sits on the grass—it demands far less of a digging blow to get it up in the air. On long shots, certainly, it needs much more driving forward, and much less squeezing up.

This may seem to conflict with the fact that so many top American players dig out big divots on short wedge shots. But that, when true, is merely because

they are playing a particular kind of low-flying push shot which calls for squeezing the ball. For the vast majority of strokes hit by the ordinary middle and long-handicap week-end golfer, the likelihood is that far less turf would be taken, and fairway wear and tear substantially reduced.

The second factor which might come into the greenkeeper's life where the change to be made in this country might be a sudden relief from complaints about the trueness or otherwise of the greens. This would not be because trueness of surface would be in itself any less important to golf. It would remain absolutely paramount. But greens would at once seem truer than before—simply because the larger-sized ball runs more easily over minor irregularities which badly affect the smaller one. The difference in size between a 1.62 in. ball and a 1.68 in. looks small in figures, but in actual effect is quite substantial.

### **Less Bunkers**

The third and perhaps most important effect might prove to be that upon course value: although a really well hit drive will go just about as far with the American ball as with the British ball, a shot hit at only 75% accuracy will go markedly less far with the big ball than the small. So that a thin, cut drive which will still clear an out-of-date bunker on the right and land beyond it on the fairway with the 1.62 in. ball, with a 1.68 in. ball will lose length and drop right into it. The use of the bigger ball by all golfers would cut down the modern demand for extra bunkers to cope with the longer hitters, who carry the ones originally designed for the course.

Anything which lessens the need for extra bunkers—and may even lessen the need for some of the existing ones—is a natural ally to the greenkeeper.

The same factor would operate in course length. There are numbers of courses which today either have already been lengthened to match the modern British ball, or which are on the list for lengthening. With the 1.68 in. ball, the need at once lessens; simply because only the really well-hit shot will go the

sort of length which causes the trouble—and really well-hit shots amongst ordinary golfers are in the minority.

### **Floater?**

This line of thought can be, and has been, taken further: to suggest that part of the answer to the greenkeeping problem is to reduce radically the length the ball will travel, so that 380 yards becomes a full-length two-shotter, and 450 yards a genuine par-5. Henry Longhurst has many times suggested that the simple answer to all question of regulating the performance of golf balls (cutting out all elaborate resilience tests, etc.,) is simply to say that: "A golf ball shall float".

That simple fact would introduce a constant relationship between weight and surface area; giving balls constant ballistic characteristics irrespective of size. Trial and error would produce the best optimum size for play; there might even be room for three or four sizes for current strengths and temperaments of players.

What such a rule would certainly do is to end for good the stretching-out of courses which has been going on for the last forty years; bring back into play bunkering and hazards long left behind, enable clubs to revert to older tees closer to previous greens; and even—perhaps—enable week-end golfers to get round in 2½ hours again instead of 3.

### **Early Riser**

It would also give the greenkeeper a shorter, simpler course to maintain; with considerably less wear and tear on fairways, since the floater would rise for the ordinary golfer even more easily than the present American-size ball. Nor would the ball be difficult to make. In fact most manufacturers could probably turn it out merely by substituting a light fluid in the core-sac of each ball instead of a heavy one—put in at present simply to bring the ball up to 1.62 oz. weight.

What we probably need is some rich man to start his own public course and club, and make using a floater a condition of playing, having designed the course accordingly. It would, at the very least, be an interesting experiment.