

## Saving par: Is space-age equipment wrecking the game?

By RONALD W. FREAM

Have you noticed the profound changes sweeping the golf industry? There is no comparable period going back to the dim emergence of the game as a sport rather than a shepherd's pastime some 400 years ago.

The driving forces for this change are genetics and nutrition, visual exposure, the media, teaching methods and technology. In the span of the past 10 years, what had traditionally been accepted as standard is no longer standard. What has been adequate, acceptable and expected for decades on the golf course has ceased to exist.

The changes I refer to are mostly related to the revolution in golf equipment. We now have club shafts made of carbon graphite, Kelvar and other exotic new materials. New metal woods, in diverse designs and sizes, feature point-of-impact sweet spot positioning. New irons of tungsten and titanium provide more ball control. These are not the same tools Byron Nelson or Ben Hogan used a generation or two ago.

### BLESSED BY GOLF'S TOP BRASS

These technological changes, more or less blessed by the U.S. Golf Association and The Royal & Ancient, provide the average and even the beginning golfer with the hope of longer drives, fewer slices, shorter, more precise approach

shots, easier relief from bunkers or rough and truer putts.

But in the professional ranks, one only need review the average tournament scores to note their downward progression. Certainly scores have progressively receded from the 1920s era, but until the technological stampede of recent years, the trend was gradual. An Open victory with an above-par score was the norm in the teens and twenties.

In the past 10 years, the average drive recorded at professional tournaments has increased by around 20 to 25 yards for "average" PGA pros, to the 285- to 290-yard range. The exceptions, Tiger Woods and John Daly, average 300 yards or more without pressing.

On the LPGA Tour, lengths undreamed of by average male players a generation ago now are common. Karrie Webb averages 258 yards off the tee – and she is not the longest driver. Many par-5s now are par-4.5s due to length improvements with driver and long iron. For the pros, global positioning survey equipment produces



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course cards that give distances down to the nearest foot.

### HONEY, I SHRUNK THE GOLF COURSE

Better equipment, better turf, stronger players, better players – what is the golf course owner, operator, manager or superintendent to do? I believe that little attention to the implications of these changes has been devoted to their full impact.

All of these converging factors of game improvement are creating a very serious and long-term problem. Every existing golf course is being reduced in challenge and strategy as the typical drive becomes longer. The game loses designed-in playing character that will lessen the enjoyment of the meaningful traditions of golf for pros and every other golfer as well, as technology compresses every golf course.

There are now over 60 million golfers worldwide. There are nearly 18,000 golf courses in the United States and an additional 10,000 around the world. The rapid and recent advancements in technology and accompanying potential for longer drives and shorter approach shots have reduced the playing challenge and par value of almost all courses.

Technology has shortened courses, made second shots easier, putts truer. Seven thousand yards is no longer con-

sidered long. For the women, 6,300 is now more appropriate for a pro event than 6,000 or 6,100 yards. Par-4s are now par-3.7s. Par-5s are par-4.5s. Par 70 or 72 is invalid. Sub-par rounds become par and tournament wins at 15 under or more are expected.

Even the senior tour is showing double-digit scores below par by the second day. When these players were on the regular tour 20 or 25 years ago, double digit, below par winning scores were infrequent and almost exceptional.

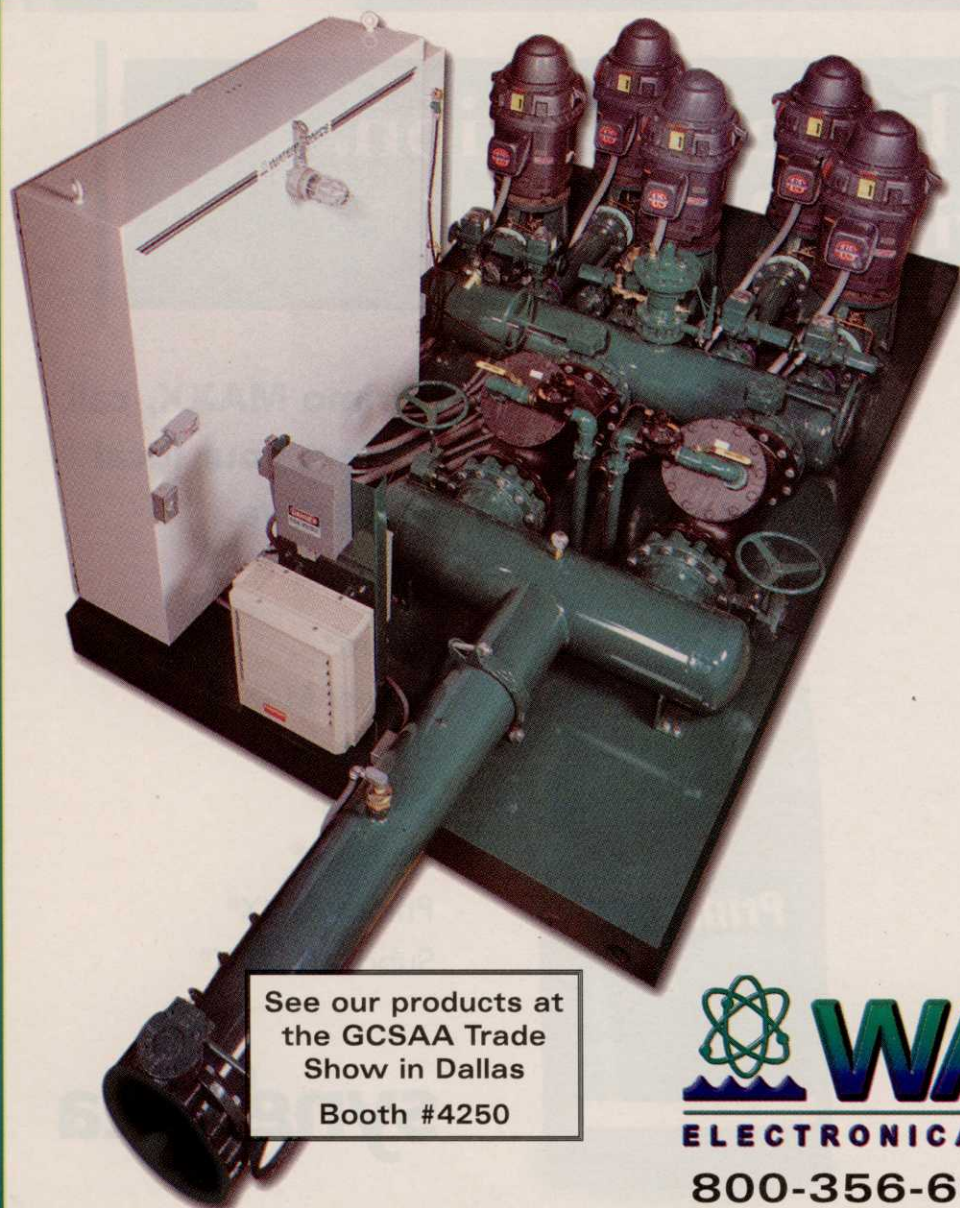
### THE DIMINISHMENT OF PAR

The USGA definition of par is no longer valid. The traditional standards of golf are being sacrificed and reduced. Average touring pros win their one and only tournament by sub-par scores once only dreamed of. Tiger wins by scores that even he should not win by. Technology has distorted the fact that, as originally

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### HOUSE OF CORRECTIONS

Last month's story about Golf Trust of America reported that shareholders would vote on the company's liquidation in January. The vote will occur at a later date, the company said. We regret the error.



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## COMMENTARY

### Fream: In defense of par

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conceived, golf was never meant to be easy. Now, at least at the professional level, it is.

For country clubs and public courses alike, the situation is critical. With everyone hitting or at least trying to hit the ball farther, most golf courses today are too

short and undefended. They are open to an exploitation and opportunism that is beyond the original intent of the design. The challenge is mitigated or muted, and indeed, once-challenging courses are becoming boring.

Par should still mean errorless play and not become an in-

significant number to be violated with regularity and abandon.

How far can this go? No serious effort appears on the horizon to temper the technological advance. Too much profit and too many lawyers bar the way. Golfers, spectators and the media seem to be impressed with sub-par rounds. The long and historic tradition of golf is raped and pillaged and there are few complaints or protests.

Even Augusta National and The Old Course have made only faint design-related efforts to stem the assault.

#### MOUNTING A DEFENSE

This diminishment of the value of par really is a serious problem. To counteract the technological onslaught requires amounts of money for remodeling and redesign most courses do not have. There must be counter action,

sooner rather than later, unless the general golfing public and the public relations and marketing types begin to sell the idea that a round of 60 is normal and to be admired.

Rebuilding a course to lengthen tees, reposition fairway bunkers or add bunkering and create a new, more contoured and demanding putting surface is not inexpensive. Consider one million dollars or more per 18-hole course to "Tigerize" the layout. Multiply by 18,000. Add up the total - \$18 billion. The money simply is not there. Rebuilding every course to counteract technology is impossible.

Moreover, not every course today has extra land available. It will not be long before 7,300 yards is looked at as normal for a "championship" course. It may be impossible to "Tigerize" every course. Mr. Woods can hit the ball farther than land exists.

Others can take steps to create a partial defense. They can reposition tees, lengthen when possible, remove too-short bunkers and reposition other bunkers, add mounds or sloped contours to test and perhaps even trap the 280- or 290-yard drive. Water hazards are harder to modernize; however, position of tee shot and insertion of the water strategically into play off the tee or at the greensite can help provide defense.

#### REDUCING CUP DIAMETER

Remodeling, upgrading and repositioning of existing courses will become more common as the impact of "average" club players' 250- or 260-yard drives and shorter approach shots expands. Par has value and must not be void of meaning if the traditions of golf are to remain intact.

Consider, if you will, a new valuation system for par - at least for tournaments. Move par-3 to 275 or 280 yards. Make par-4 extend to 510 or 520 yards. From the tournament tees or club back tees, a course once par-72 might even now be par-70. A reconsideration of the current rating system would reflect lengths and distances undreamed of 20 years ago.

Eliminating global positioning systems and other measured course guides, if only for tournaments, would force players to judge distance. This would have an immediate effect.

If technology advances too much further, it may become desirable to add a few grams to the weight of a ball. The last resort is to reduce the diameter of the cup by half an inch, at least for professional tournaments. ■

Ronald W. Fream, of Fream & Dale GOLFPLAN, has provided golf course design and consultation to clients in nearly 60 countries since 1966. His firm is based in Santa Rosa, Calif. This article is excerpted from a longer essay.

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