

Designer's forum

By Dr. Michael J. Hurdzan



Michael J. Hurdzan, Ph.D., is a partner in the golf course architectural firm of Kidwell & Hurdzan, Inc., Columbus, Ohio. Dr. Hurdzan received his Doctor of Philosophy in Environmental Plant Physiology and his

Master of Science in Turfgrass Physiology from the University of Vermont. Dr. Hurdzan is a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, and is on that association's Board of Governors. He is also a member of the Ohio Turfgrass Foundation, USGA, NGF and the Golf Collectors' Society. Dr. Hurdzan has authored many articles on golf course design and maintenance and is currently writing a book on the history of golf course architecture.

Robertsonism: The secret golfing religion

There are some religions that believe that Satan often chooses to appear in the most appropriate physical form to best work his black deeds. Such beliefs are shared by many people, including a little known order of devotees, all of them confirmed golfers, who secretly, although sometimes overtly, acknowledge the teachings and prophecies of Robertsonism. This order began in 1848 A.D., at the most holy (perhaps even holey) place in golf, the Links of St. Andrews in Scotland.

It was in that year that a priest, of all people, unleashed a black demon, literally, called the Gutta percha golf ball. From this date forward, the golf ball has caused more controversy and has dramatically changed golf and golf courses more than any other single factor.

The man who foresaw this menace was named Allan Robertson, 1815-1859, who was not only the golf professional at St. Andrews, and was said to have never have been beaten, but also he was the most prodigious and accomplished maker of feathery golf balls.

Robertson strongly fought the introduction and widespread use of the gutty. He felt that this innovation of a more lively golf ball, which permitted the less accomplished player to easily carry difficult hazards because of its improved resiliency and flight characteristics, would diminish the role of skill in shot making, and would begin a trend of lengthening of golf courses to insure an adequate challenge. His

fervor for his beliefs led him to bitter disagreements with most well-known golfers of the day.

But, with characteristic Scottish tenacity, Allan first tried to buy up and destroy all the gutties that were found at St. Andrews. When failing this and he was at last forced to manufacture the 'damned black ball', he clearly tried to enunciate the incipient evil of golf ball development. No one disagreed with Allan that such a golf ball did make golf easier and golf courses less challenging, but it was a two-sided coin for it also attracted many new golfers because golf was now easier to learn and much less expensive (gutties were about $\frac{1}{3}$ - $\frac{1}{4}$ the price of the feathery and much more durable). So now the precepts of Robertsonism were clear and may simply be stated as:

1. Resist new golf ball innovations that may ruin the character of our existing golf courses and required skills of golf;
2. But if such innovations attract new golfers, and makes the game more fun and cheaper for them, support the product but speak of the possible evil.

These Robertsonian ideas were reforged and strengthened over the next 50 years with introductions of new dimple patterns and mixtures of Gutta percha and other materials. So when the first wound ball was invented in 1898 and introduced in 1902, Robertsonites reluctantly endorsed the 'damned wound ball', but not before expressing the perceived negative aspects of this even longer flying ball. Over the next 50-60 years, debates over size, weight, dimples, and construction materials were to accupy the best minds in golf.

Finally, in the mid 70's, the disciples of Robertson, having been properly recognized and initiated into high positions in the USGA, the R & A, and other golfing bodies, decided to make a crusade to once and for all limit the influence of the evil long distance golf ball. The rules of golf for 1976 stated, for the first time, that "the velocity of the ball shall not be greater than 250 feet per second when measured on apparatus approved by USGA..."

Another standard to be used outdoors was to measure and limit the distance which any ball may travel so as not to exceed 280 yards (8 percent tolerance) when struck with a

calibrated club. End of sentence, end of paragraph, end of discussion. Maybe.

But about this same time, along comes U.S. Patent Number 3,819,190 for "a golf ball having controllable flight characteristic . . .", a ball that reduces hooks and slices. Once more followers of Robertsonism had to gird themselves for the inevitable battle to protect the honor and integrity of golf and golf courses. To my knowledge, this war is still being waged in the courtroom.

Now I am, like most other Golf Course Architects, a believer in Robertsonism and I share the same fears as my colleagues and golfing compatriots. But I believe in the entire doctrine of not only resisting blatant affronts on golf but also of supporting such ideas if they help the beginner. Therefore, I am somewhat bothered by the hypocrisy of open resistance of some people to the "Polara" golf ball, while lauding the virtues of the "Jumbo" ball. It is my feeling that they are both intended to help the beginner and in fact have qualities that will do just that.

The principle of the Jumbo is a high center of gravity which makes the ball easier to get airborne while the Polara relies on a dimple pattern that, when aligned to the direction of flight, acts to stabilize the flight and reduce hooks and slices. Granted, the Jumbo ball is legal for USGA competitions because of its size, but if one does not improve his lie in USGA competition, and therefore cannot orient the dimple pattern of the Polara, except on the tee, there seems to be little advantage.

With crowded conditions of our golf courses today and the often close proximity of housing to golf holes, I would think that the golf industry would applaud an innovation which might speed up play, improve safety and help the novice. If I owned a facility frequented by beginners, I would unabashedly remind these clients of the possible enjoyment they could get from such golf ball designs.

Similarly, it might be interesting to know how a legal jury might react to a damage case where an unskilled golfer ignored the availability of a "controllable flight ball". Would they find him more negligent than if he recognized his abilities and took every precaution to insure safety by playing such a ball?