

The USGA, to put it kindly, has done a lousy job of presenting its case for ball and equipment regulation. Until four years ago, the USGA refused to acknowledge that rapid advances in equipment technology — which it was supposed to be monitoring — were rendering traditional courses all but obsolete.

But incoming USGA President Trey Holland is pledging to communicate the USGA's desire for equipment regulation with new fervor and energy to combat the perception by a majority of golfers that the blue blazers in Far Hills, N.J., are evil regulators determined to steal everyone's extra 10 yards.

The USGA's pending attempts to regulate the ball are somewhat analogous to Alan Greenspan's interest rate increases. Like interest rates, the ever-increasing length a ball travels affects many variables, all of which are vital to the future health of golf. If something is not done soon, significant changes in the way golf is played will negatively affect the long-term livelihood of everyone in the golf business.

In a nutshell, here is why the ball problem will affect golf negatively:

Courses are getting longer because everyone who builds the latest and greatest either consciously or unconsciously sees themselves hosting a pro tournament someday. So they keep building longer courses to accommodate changes in the game and to pad their yardages.

Longer golf courses mean more acreage is needed. More acreage means more ground to purchase and eventually more land to maintain, translating to higher green fees to be passed onto the customer. With the average new courses getting longer and older ones trying to "upgrade" to the dreaded championship plateaus, the game is getting unnecessarily tougher to play. Worse, longer holes take much more time to play. And to get to the magical marketing total of 7,000 yards, the most amusing holes almost always have to be eliminated from design.

Increasing distance for good players (who are too often the focus of everyone in golf) turns this into a numbers game, yet the most satisfying golf has little to do with playing courses of certain yardage. Ironically, longer and more expensive courses taking six hours to play ultimately scares

It's Time to Stop Distance Madness

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



CAN THE GAME
AFFORD TO
ALIENATE
41 MILLION
POTENTIAL
CUSTOMERS?

people away from golf. The National Golf Foundation estimates there are 41 million people who rarely play or don't play at all because of the prohibitive factors listed above. Plus, golf has only grown by about 2 million players during recent years. At a time of prosperity, incredible popularity and the best widespread course maintenance ever seen, those numbers indicate that golf has not attracted or kept enough players, probably because of slow play and difficulty.

Now, if the ball companies have their way and win the inevitable court battle with the USGA over "optimization" (the technical term for ball regulation), you can guarantee that golf courses will continue to expand in length and those 41 million people will still stay away.

Can the game afford to alienate that many potential customers? Wall Street, whose job is to plant the growth mantra in every industry guru, probably would be surprised to hear that such a huge potential market is being shut out. And all because some golf ball manufacturers won't be able to sell balls based on who won last week on the PGA Tour.

Well, I'm not holding my breath for Wall Street to figure this one out and urge the ball companies to settle. This will have to be a grassroots campaign by the people who make golf the great pastime that it is. Let the ball companies pursue their capitalistic desires. But the USGA needs to communicate with superintendents, architects, the media and management companies to support them in this important cause.

I know you have enough headaches. But supporting the USGA on the ball issue in any way you can is one cause that's vital for the short- and long-term well-being of everyone in golf.

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