

POINTLESS REVOLU

Alternative, or soft, spikes have arrived with a bang in the United States in the last four years but will they make as big an impression on this side of the Atlantic? Scott MacCallum spoke with the man charged with the task masterminding their introduction to Europe.

The clatter of golf spikes on paths and car parks is as much a familiar sound at golf clubs up and down the country as surlyn on wood or the cry of "Fore!" but it may soon be consigned to the golfing archives, becoming no more than an audio reminder of what once was... alongside the hickory shaft, featherie golf ball and loud checked trousers.

Having said that, noise pollution is perhaps the least significant development of the alternative spike revolution which is currently sweeping the United States and which seems poised to make an impression on this side

of the Atlantic.

Alternative spikes -Softspikes is a trade name like Sellotape or Hoover - arrived in America four years ago and, pushed by the superintendents, around 1,000 of the 14,000 golf courses in the United States have gone "spikeless". It is forecast that that figure will rise to 5,000 by the end of the year.

You can well understand the superintendents' appreciation for the new soft cleat which barely marks the green but through their design - small gripping teeth around a plastic base - still offers significant traction for the golfer.

On certain courses spiking can make quite a mess of the green. You may recall last year's USPGA

Championship at the Riviera Country Club and the problem the later starters had finding a route to the hole devoid of destructive spike marks.

A boffin has worked out that the average number of paces taken on a green is 52 and the number of spikes per shoe is 11. With that in mind each golfer leaves 572 spike marks on the green, 10,296 on a round. That's over 41,000 potentially damaging spike marks for each fourball.

Cliff Hitchcock is Managing Director of MacNeill UK, a fully owned subsidiary of MacNeill Engineering Worldwide, the world's largest manufacturer of sports shoe hardware, which produces the Tred-Lite alternative

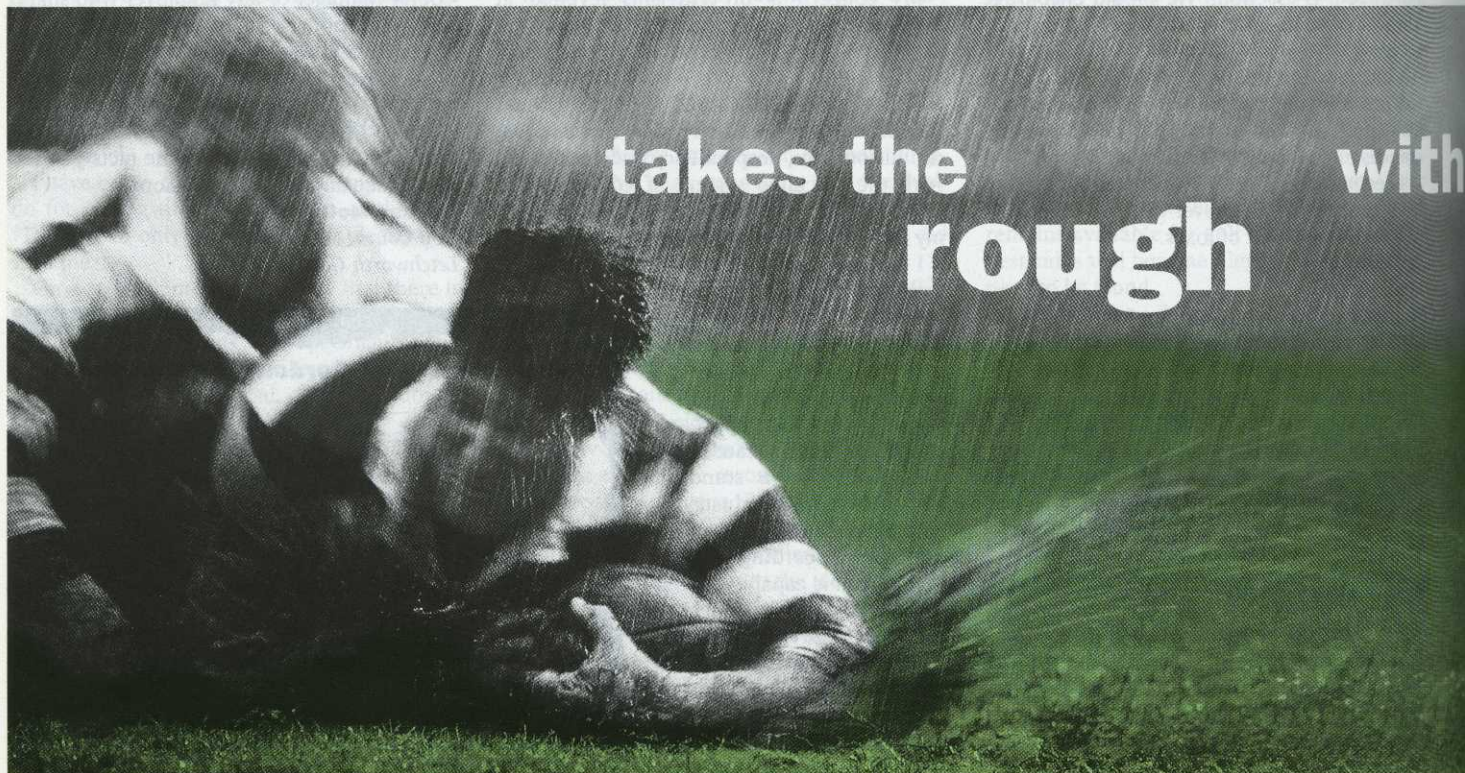
spike and many others under the name of golf shoe manufacturers.

"Since 1931 we have produced five billion golf spikes. We're currently producing four million spikes a day. I just can't understand where they all go. It's an amazing number of spikes," said Cliff, who masterminds sales and distribution for the whole of Europe from his base near Leicester.

"I keep being asked whether the alternative spike phenomenon in the States will come over to Europe and I think it is down to the types of grasses used. There are more courses in the States which use Bent grasses which have roots very close to the surface and which tend to spike up more easily than traditional European greens.

"I spoke with an American at the trade show in Orlando recently who told me that his course had gone 'spikeless' three months previously and he could not believe the improvement in the quality of the greens since that day," he said.

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"I suppose certain courses, with those types of greens, in Europe will go spikeless. I know Valderama already has."

There is a big difference, however, between an individual trying alternative spikes and liking them from a comfort point of view and a golf club turning round and saying you have got to wear them.

"I believe the clubs in Europe which make it mandatory will be in a very small minority."

It is easy to understand Cliff's reasoning. Proprietary-owned golf clubs, which predominate in

the States, can set rules as they see fit and it is hard to imagine members' clubs, which are in the majority in Europe and particularly the UK, imposing such demands on themselves.

"There are around 4200 clubs in Europe and I believe no more than 400 will have gone spikeless in the next 12 months," fore-

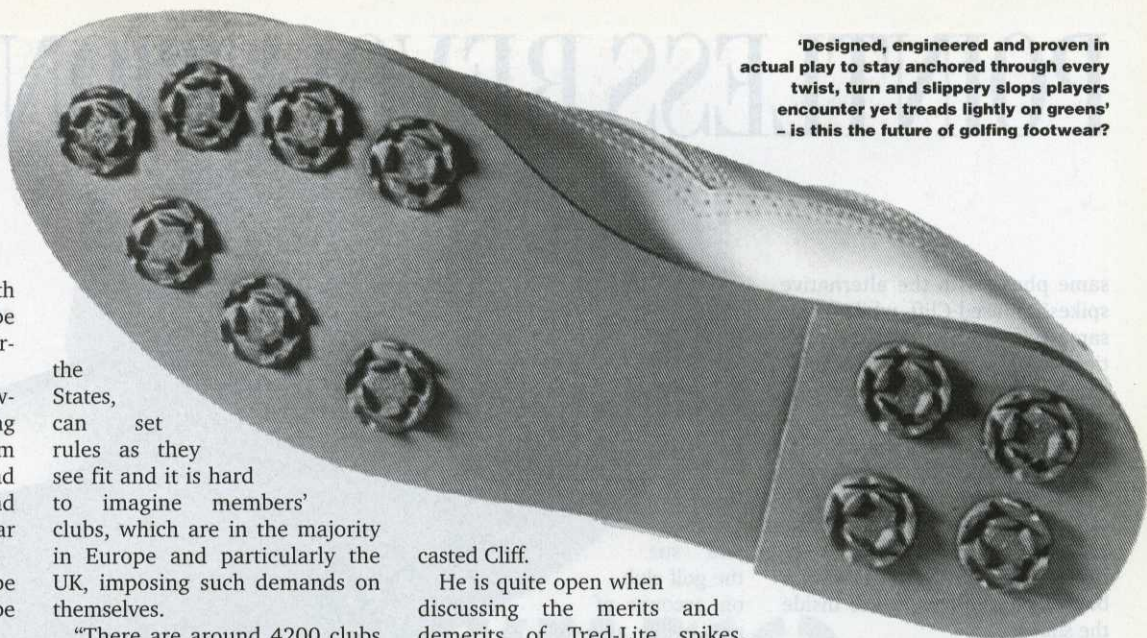
casted Cliff.

He is quite open when discussing the merits and demerits of Tred-Lite spikes, which under the overall MacNeill banner of Champ are being marketed as "Champ is getting soft".

"There is no doubt that the traditional spike, at 8mm long, offers the best traction you can get. The top Tour pro may feel he needs the most stable base he can get and still use traditional spikes. The average handicapper, however, would probably not notice the difference," said Cliff.

The new alternative spike marks the first significant development in golfing footwear since the dimpled soled shoe launched

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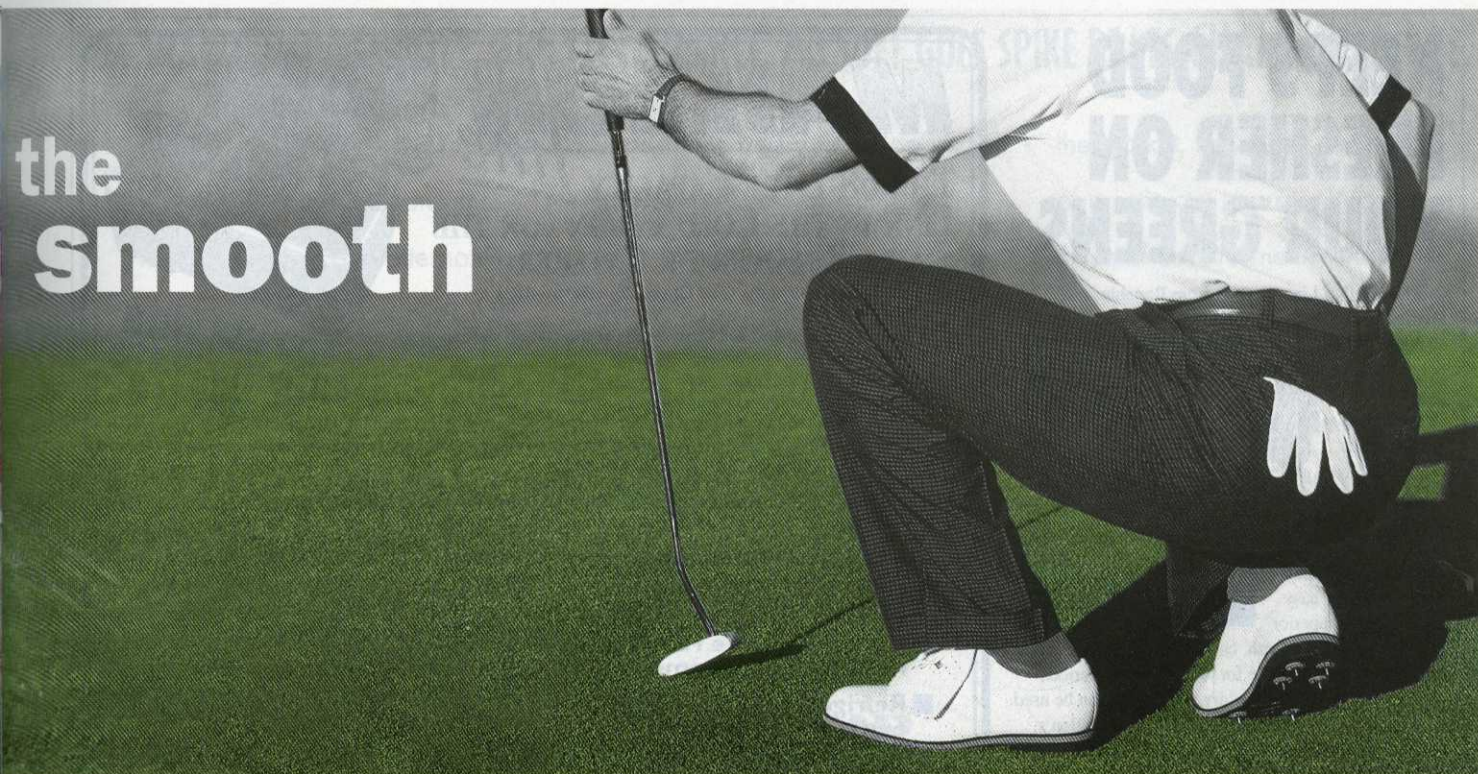


'When they were launched greenkeepers thought they were great and were delighted that spike marks were to become a thing of the past'

itself onto the market about 15 years ago.

"When they were launched greenkeepers said they were great and were delighted that spike marks were to become a thing of the past. What killed them off was that the dimples themselves created so many ripples on the greens that the ball bounced all over the place.

"Eventually people became disillusioned with the idea and they faded away. They now represent a very small percentage of the market. Are we going through the



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same phase with the alternative spikes?" mused Cliff, while at the same time adding that the traction on the new spike is significantly better than was offered with the dimpled sole.

In America shoe manufacturers are just beginning to sell golf shoes with the alternative spike already in the shoes but the majority are still offering traditional spikes in the shoes with a bag of alternatives spikes inside the shoes.

"Some of the manufacturers are worried that if courses go spikeless the next step would be that you don't need golf shoes. Any shoe manufacturer could come up with a shoe that has a sole full of dimples. I believe that is in the back of the manufacturers' minds."

One problem which Cliff can foresee is potential litigation if someone is compelled to change his or her spikes before playing a course and then slips and breaks an ankle.

"What's going to happen then?"

He or she will sue the golf club on account of not being able to play the course without changing to alternative spikes. The golf club will sue the distributor and the distributor will sue us.

"That's why we do put a warning on the packaging to say they are not ideal for use on moist, slippery ground."

Another downside of the new spike is that, unlike the newest metal spikes which are made from tungsten, they wear out and need to be replaced.

"Our Tred-Lites last longer than most but because they have to be

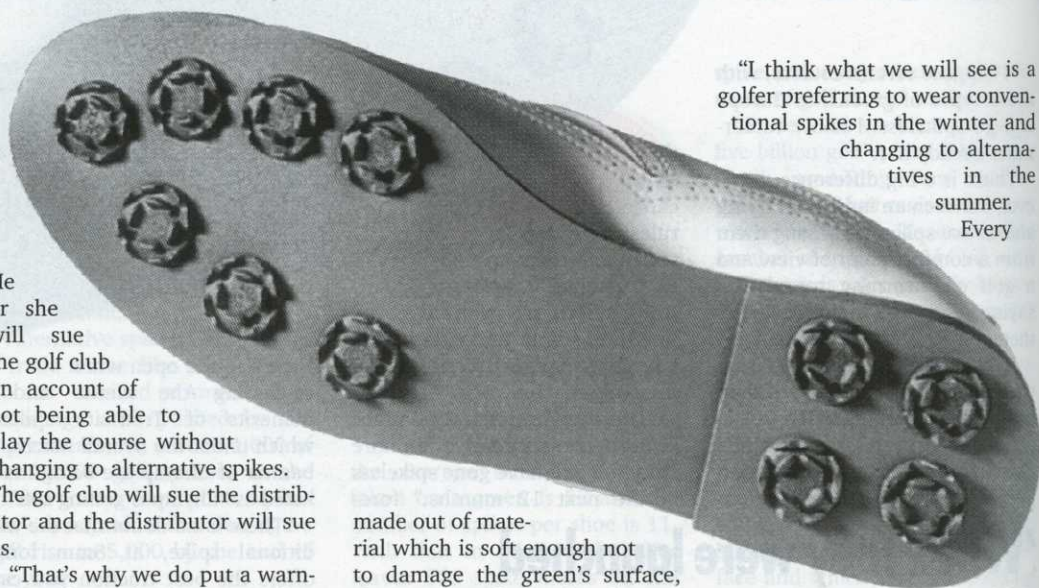
made out of material which is soft enough not to damage the green's surface, they need to be replaced. How quickly depends on the nature of the golf course."

From a business point of view the introduction of the alternative spike has been a huge boost to MacNeill Engineering which has now seen its production rise by 20% to cope with the new demand.

"I think what we will see is a golfer preferring to wear conventional spikes in the winter and changing to alternatives in the summer. Every

golfer will need two sets of spikes which is good for the industry," predicted Cliff.

■ If you have any views on alternative spikes please write to The Editor, Greenkeeper International, Aldwark Manor, Aldwark, Alne, Nr York, YO6 2NF



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