

3-2-1 BLASTOFF

After a two-year hiatus, the U.S. successfully launched the Space Shuttle Discovery from Cape Canaveral. I don't remember the circumstances surrounding the day, but I remember being home and watching the launch on my 50-inch, high-definition TV. What a wonderful and glorious sight it was with all the rumbling, roaring, fire, and smoke associated with the initial blastoff.

Fast forward a couple of weeks to August 11. The launching of little white balls began at Baltusrol. I was absolutely horrified to watch not just Tiger, John, and Phil hitting it over 300 yards every

AS IT LIES



Jim Walker

time they teed off, but the entire field was bombing it out of sight. Then came the Ladies Amateur won by Morgan Pressel, a high-school senior who was hitting it 260 yards. The *coup de gras* was the World Championship at Firestone where, on one particular hole, the entire field of 64 hit it 300 yards-plus except for two weaklings who only got it out in the 290s. On one hole, Tiger hit it 340 and was still behind Mike Weir. That's correct, the little Canadian who must be all of 5-7 and 140 pounds soaking wet smoked it 365 yards. Enough of the groundwork, my point is the ball is going too far, and anyone who doesn't think so is looking at the world — or in this case, golf course — through rose-colored glasses.

Now I don't want to sound like a bitter old frump who can't hit it out of his own shadow anymore, but where is this all going to end? The equipment has gotten so good, along with the players and their strength conditioning and personal sports psychologists that every golf course in the world is too short unless it is tricked up with rough 4 inches long and greens faster than the speed of light.

I played a course recently where I had a downhill 8-footer for birdie that missed and went 6 feet past the hole. Not because I hit it too hard, but because gravity wouldn't let it stop any sooner. It was

like putting a ball from the back of your bathtub and trying to stop it short of the drain.

I know the USGA and the R&A have had a tough time trying to keep the lid on the equipment frenzy over the last 10 years or so, and the whole thing has been driven by the manufacturers who have turned the game into a corporate sideshow with each one jockeying for a bigger share of the marketplace.

Our balls go farther, are softer, and don't spin as much. Our drivers are bigger and better. They are made with space-age alloys, and are the size of two-slice toasters. Let's don't forget the shaft — which spent two years in development — and you can have it all for about the same price as a small Japanese car. But it's worth it, because if you hit it in the sweet spot it will drive the ball 8 yards farther.

Ninety-five percent of the golfing public can't break 100 and may not hit one ball dead solid perfect in a round. They would be just as well off with the clubs they had 10 years ago, provided it was quality equipment to begin with, but the equipment folks keep grinding out the new products every year to feed the financial corporate giants of the game. Their talking head marketing folks do one hell of a job convincing people that this year's equipment will add distance and lower their scores. There's about as much chance of that happening as the U.S. military finding Osama Bin Laden, and giving him his own personal 9-11.

In preparing to write this article I contacted the USGA and spoke to Carter Rich who is the manager of equipment rulings. He pointed me in the right direction of which USGA Web sites to visit to get some nuts and bolts, and he was most helpful and polite. I want to further state that nothing I have written thus far — or will write to this article's conclusion — was said or implied by Mr. Rich.

There is a "Joint Statement of Principles" put forth by the USGA and the R&A that states in part: "...the game has seen progressive developments in the clubs and balls available to golfers who, throughout six centuries, have sought to improve their playing performance and enjoyment.

"The R&A and the USGA continue to believe that the retention of a single set of rules for all players of the game, irrespective of ability, is one of golf's greatest strengths.

"The R&A and the USGA regard the prospect of having permanent separate rules for elite competition as undesirable and have no current plans to create separate equipment rules for highly skilled players.

"Golf balls used by the vast majority of highly skilled players today have largely reached the performance limits for initial velocity and overall

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distance.

"The R&A and the USGA believe however, that any further significant increases in hitting distances at the highest level are undesirable."

They go on to say that lengthening courses is cost prohibitive and have negative environmental and ecological issues. It would also slow the pace of play and playing costs would increase.

So it's safe to say that the rule-makers are very aware of what's going on in the game of long ball: hitting for the fences, taking it deep.

So, here's what happens: You take a ball with 432 dimples which is 1.682 inches in diameter, weighs 1.59 ounces, put it on a tee 2-1/2 inches long, and hit it with a driver with a head that fills 460 cc, has a coefficient of restitution of .83, on the end of a high-tech shaft. The ball is in contact with the clubhead for 450 microseconds, hit with 2,000 pounds of force, compresses one-fourth of its diameter, and — if properly hit — has backspin making it fly as wings make an airplane fly.

My personal take on the situation is that the governing bodies got caught with their pants down because everything hit at the same time. They were testing clubs and balls, but not launch angles or aerodynamics. They didn't see the guys in the gym getting stronger. They didn't see them throw away their cigarettes and drinking Perrier or diet soda instead of scotch and beer. There was just so much stuff coming down the pike at once that they blinked a couple of times, got threatened with a few lawsuits and here we are with a 15-year-old girl hitting it 300 yards!

Yes, she's a great player... but 300 yards?

The rule makers are back on track and need our support to keep the game we all love safe from the corporate techies. If you do not belong to the USGA, join! Visit their Web site at www.usga.org and see what they are doing to protect our game. In particular, look at the list of non-conforming clubs and balls. So much technology, so little time.

See you on the range... or maybe in orbit.