

Short ball goes long way for developers

BY VERN PUTNEY

Lower construction and maintenance costs, less playing time, tighter competition — the Cayman ball could be the answer for a lot of golf developers.

It seems strange that Jack Nicklaus, the king of the long ball for perhaps 20 years, would take the lead in developing a ball good for only half the distance of the regulation ball. But it now appears he was a man of vision.

As available land worldwide shrinks, so may future golf courses — and the Cayman, or "Modified Distance Ball" Nicklaus first commissioned McGregor Golf Co. to develop — could be in the forefront of the action.

A keen student of the game with an eye to history, Nicklaus probably was aware there was patent application in 1939 for a golf ball that went one-third the distance of a conventional ball. An adequate ball never was developed.

Chucker ball, a golf-like game played with oversized golf balls, 6-inch cups and shorter length holes, gained only limited support.

Fortunate timing played the biggest role in getting the ball off the drawing board and into the air.

Shortly after Nicklaus in the spring of 1982 commissioned McGregor to develop the short-distance golf ball, developers of the Britannia resort at Grand Cayman Island in the British West Indies approached Nicklaus.



MacGregor's Troy Puckett, left, with Cayman ball proponent Jack Nicklaus.

They wished to offer golf as an amenity but had only about one-third of the average golf course acreage.

Could a short golf course be built?

Nicklaus savored the challenge. Building a short course and having the unharnessed ball sail into the nearby ocean wouldn't work.

The ball was the key.

"The golf ball always has dictated how much land we need for a course," said Nicklaus. "I felt we could tailor the ball to the land."

Troy Puckett, MacGregor's director of manufacturing who led the "half ball" research forces in the early to mid-1980s, sub-

mitted at least a dozen prototypes before the present Cayman ball was born.

Since then it has been renamed the Modified Distance Ball because a Japanese golf association patented the name Cayman. But whatever its name, the ball goes half the distance of a conventional ball, no matter what club is used.

The short ball chips and putts much like the conventional ball. It travels the same distance and sounds and feels similar. The balls behave similarly when hit out of sand.

The space-saving comes off the fairways, rough and tees. The traditional "feel" of golf near or on the greens is preserved.

The one-piece short ball is made by mixing a thermo-plastic polymer and glass bubbles with a chemical blowing agent. The mixture is molded into a golf ball. The end product weighs about 24 grams compared to a conventional ball that weighs 45 grams.

The short ball floats, so likely will have a longer ball life.

What of the Modified Golf Ball and golf future?

Ball developers are looking to Japan. They say the concept of "experimental, novel and interesting" has burgeoned into one of bright potential.

The Japanese lack the land, but they're devoted to golf. The Cayman ball and course may be an answer to their land dilemma.

And Japanese are buying land all over the world at an amazing rate.

Cayman courses in Florida, Arizona, South Carolina, Wisconsin and New Hampshire are thriving.

Golf course architect Bill Amick of Daytona Beach, Fla., president of the non-profit American Modified Golf Association, is positive about its future.

"Response has been overwhelming. There have been several Cayman tournaments, with sizable acceptance," said Amick, whose AMGA likely would be the governing group should Cayman golf soar as expected. "As with most changes, unless groups of people do it, individuals won't go out and do it on their own."

Golf organizations such as the PGA, USGA, PGA Tour, LPGA and the National Golf Foundation are keeping a watchful eye on Cayman golf.

Cayman golf is largely consistent with their objectives. It is not meant to replace conventional golf, and can only increase the amount of golf played. They may have to help develop rule changes.

Cayman proponents cite these advantages:

- Cayman courses can be played in much less time, for less money. The short ball can be used to handicap some golfers in order to equalize abilities within a group. Business people may play during lunch or after work.

- Players are more likely to walk, resulting in more exercise. Seniors, especially, should enjoy it; many have spent a near-lifetime on the links walking and would prefer to continue in that pattern.

- Persons not now playing for reasons of time, money or location are prime candidates.

- It is less threatening, exhausting and penalizing, because the ball travels less distance. It de-emphasizes distance because the short ball responds better to a ball hit well, rather than hard. The player will be rewarded more for accuracy than distance.

- Practice facilities will be more available, requiring only one-third of the land once necessary.

- It is safer in congested areas.

Cost and availability of land hamper golf course development, Amick said, adding 150 acres are "hard to find near metropolitan areas."

"It saves in construction costs and in maintenance costs," Amick said. "Plus playing time: None of us like to wait; there are those who like to fill their day with golf and there are others of us who enjoy two or three hours rather than all day... This is the answer for them."

Developers may figure prominently in Cayman growth.

For instance, municipalities usually have limited budgets and little land for recreational purposes. Yet they want to make golf facilities available in areas where land is typically very expensive.

Hotel chains or resorts may use Cayman golf as an amenity to increase occupancy rates. Condominiums, apartments or luxury home complexes may adopt to increase sales.

Existing regulation golf facilities may add a Cayman course if they have extra acreage. This could increase membership revenues, ease capacity problems or contribute revenues to existing overhead.

Some regulation clubs also may wish to convert and develop the remaining acreage into residential or commercial facilities.

This would be particularly attractive to financially troubled clubs or those located in densely populated, high land-cost areas.

Existing par 3 or executive facilities might be converted to a short or combination course to increase play and service to the community.

Since 1888, the ball ranging from the lop-sided "gutta percha" to the current aerodynamic beauty 1.68 inches in diameter, weighing 45 grams and designed to travel 250 yards when smacked with a driver has "driven" billions of dollars into real estate for golf courses in the United States.

Cayman adherents see large-scale success — and some controversy — beyond the current excitement. MacGregor might simply say it was a sound business venture.

Tourney set

The second annual International Modified Golf Open Championship will be played Oct. 14-15 at the par 72, 4,164-yard Eagle Landing Golf Club in Hanahan, S.C., according to golf course architect William Amick, president of the American Modified Golf Association.

Players entering the 36-hole tournament must use the modified or "Cayman" golf ball. Entry fee is \$55 and the tournament is open to men and women of all ages and skill levels. For information write The AMGA, P.O. Box 1984, Daytona Beach, Fla., 32015, or call Eagle Landing at 803-797-1667.

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