

Saving par: Is space-age equipment wrecking the game?

By RONALD W. FREAM

Have you noticed the profound changes sweeping the golf industry? There is no comparable period going back to the dim emergence of the game as a sport rather than a shepherd's pastime some 400 years ago.

The driving forces for this change are genetics and nutrition, visual exposure, the media, teaching methods and technology. In the span of the past 10 years, what had traditionally been accepted as standard is no longer standard. What has been adequate, acceptable and expected for decades on the golf course has ceased to exist.

The changes I refer to are mostly related to the revolution in golf equipment. We now have club shafts made of carbon graphite, Kelvar and other exotic new materials. New metal woods, in diverse designs and sizes, feature point-of-impact sweet spot positioning. New irons of tungsten and titanium provide more ball control. These are not the same tools Byron Nelson or Ben Hogan used a generation or two ago.

BLESSED BY GOLF'S TOP BRASS

These technological changes, more or less blessed by the U.S. Golf Association and The Royal & Ancient, provide the average and even the beginning golfer with the hope of longer drives, fewer slices, shorter, more precise approach

shots, easier relief from bunkers or rough and truer putts.

But in the professional ranks, one only need review the average tournament scores to note their downward progression. Certainly scores have progressively receded from the 1920s era, but until the technological stampede of recent years, the trend was gradual. An Open victory with an above-par score was the norm in the teens and twenties.

In the past 10 years, the average drive recorded at professional tournaments has increased by around 20 to 25 yards for "average" PGA pros, to the 285- to 290-yard range. The exceptions, Tiger Woods and John Daly, average 300 yards or more without pressing.

On the LPGA Tour, lengths undreamed of by average male players a generation ago now are common. Karrie Webb averages 258 yards off the tee – and she is not the longest driver. Many par-5s now are par-4.5s due to length improvements with driver and long iron. For the pros, global positioning survey equipment produces



Ronald W. Fream

course cards that give distances down to the nearest foot.

HONEY, I SHRUNK THE GOLF COURSE

Better equipment, better turf, stronger players, better players – what is the golf course owner, operator, manager or superintendent to do? I believe that little attention to the implications of these changes has been devoted to their full impact.

All of these converging factors of game improvement are creating a very serious and long-term problem. Every existing golf course is being reduced in challenge and strategy as the typical drive becomes longer. The game loses designed-in playing character that will lessen the enjoyment of the meaningful traditions of golf for pros and every other golfer as well, as technology compresses every golf course.

There are now over 60 million golfers worldwide. There are nearly 18,000 golf courses in the United States and an additional 10,000 around the world. The rapid and recent advancements in technology and accompanying potential for longer drives and shorter approach shots have reduced the playing challenge and par value of almost all courses.

Technology has shortened courses, made second shots easier, putts truer. Seven thousand yards is no longer con-

sidered long. For the women, 6,300 is now more appropriate for a pro event than 6,000 or 6,100 yards. Par-4s are now par-3.7s. Par-5s are par-4.5s. Par 70 or 72 is invalid. Sub-par rounds become par and tournament wins at 15 under or more are expected.

Even the senior tour is showing double-digit scores below par by the second day. When these players were on the regular tour 20 or 25 years ago, double digit, below par winning scores were infrequent and almost exceptional.

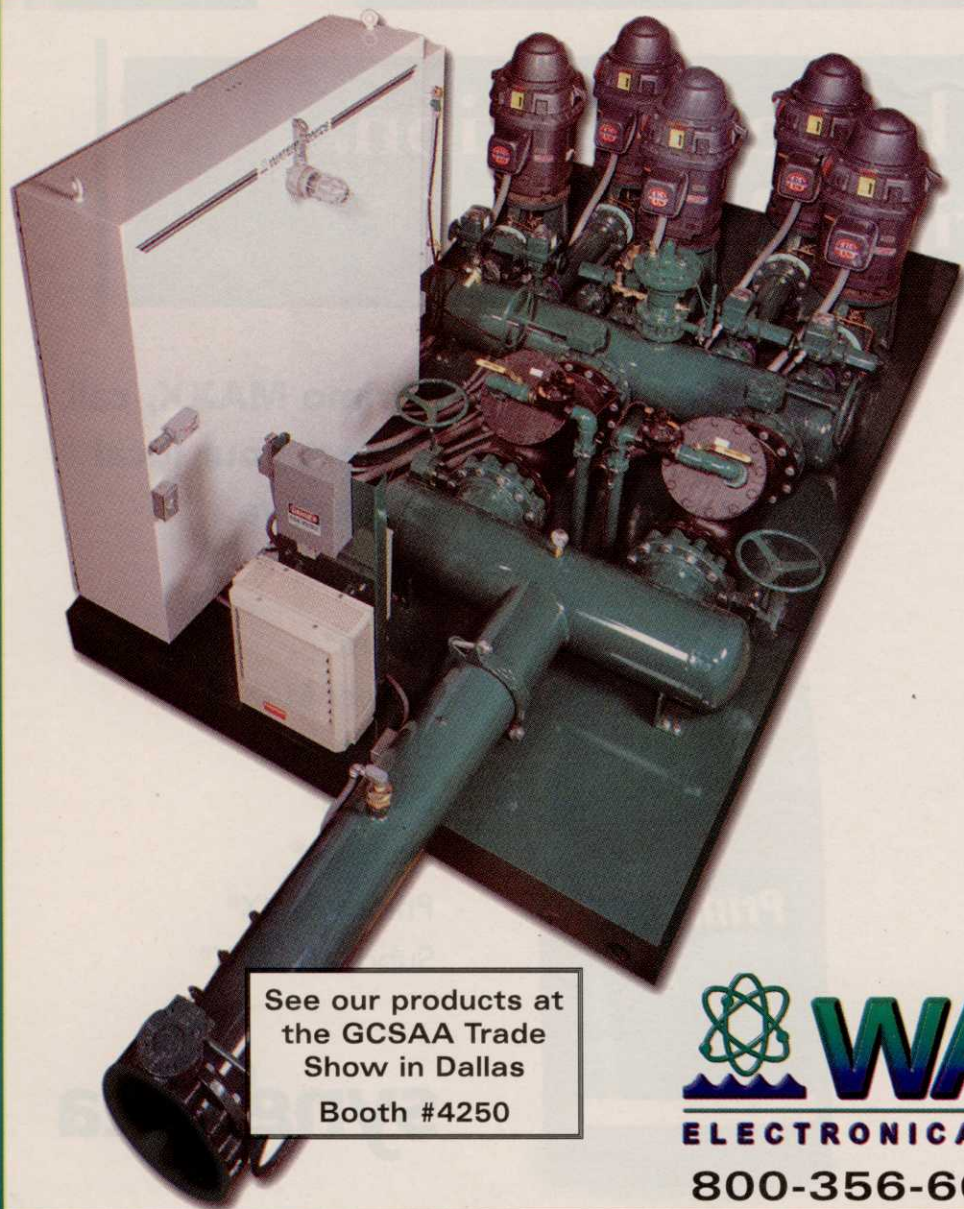
THE DIMINISHMENT OF PAR

The USGA definition of par is no longer valid. The traditional standards of golf are being sacrificed and reduced. Average touring pros win their one and only tournament by sub-par scores once only dreamed of. Tiger wins by scores that even he should not win by. Technology has distorted the fact that, as originally

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HOUSE OF CORRECTIONS

Last month's story about Golf Trust of America reported that shareholders would vote on the company's liquidation in January. The vote will occur at a later date, the company said. We regret the error.



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