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## ROLL THE BALL BACK? WHY?

I recently spoke to two groups of superintendents – one in Minnesota, the other in Pennsylvania – and during the Q&A portion of both talks I was asked the same question: “What did you think about how far Bubba Watson drove the ball in Maui?”

The questions referred to the PGA Tour's season-opening event in Hawaii where Big Bubba drove the green of a par-four measuring around 450 yards. According to the Tour's stats, he averaged 298 yards per drive during the tournament, and he only used his driver a few times.

No surprise, those questions were followed by the inevitable next one: “Do you think the golf ball should be rolled back?”

Here's my short answer: No. I'm not saying we shouldn't consider steps to make the game more challenging for the pros who make an awful lot of money from it. But for the rest of us, the ball is not the problem. There are numerous reasons the pros hit the ball so well and so far — practice, conditioning, equipment, teachers, sports psychologists and so on. Or you could just agree, as I do, with the tagline that the PGA Tour used to use to describe its players: “These guys are good.”

Much has been said about rolling back the ball. But has anyone considered how the golf ball – and the fear that it goes too far – affects those of us who tend turfgrass for a living? Here are a few agroeconomic points to mull over if you think the ball is the problem.

**WE'LL HAVE TO BUILD EXTRA-LONG COURSES.** There's a group of players, architects and other worriers who say that unless something is done about how far the ball flies we will soon be forced to build courses 8,000 yards long. To which I say: For whom? Not for me, and probably not for you, either. I'm perfectly happy and challenged, on a 6,500-yard track. Why would I want to beat myself up any more than I have to?

Building excessively long courses is an irresponsible use of both land and money. All the extra costs – construction, earth-moving, irrigation, water, chemicals/pesticides, labor and probably another dozen you can easily come up with – will end up being passed along to the member/customer. This is ultimately bad for the game and bad for our livelihoods.

The average handicap index is a little over 15. Real golfers aren't asking for longer courses. An 8,000-

yard course should exist only for Tour pros and their events and be financed by the Tour pros and their events. The other 99.9 percent of golfers, like you and me, aren't interested.

**ROLLING BACK THE BALL WILL REDUCE MAINTENANCE COSTS.** Most plans I've heard for cutting back on distance talk about a reduction of about 10 percent. Will a 10 percent shorter golf course really cost less to maintain? I doubt it. Crews still have to be hired and paid; supplies need to be purchased and used; you'll still have to remove trees, keep equipment running,

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repair cart paths and keep the turf healthy. You'll still hear the same complaints about aerified greens, slow greens, unmown rough, wet fairways and unranked bunkers.

Unless your course is planning to shrink from 7,000 yards to 4,000 yards, I don't think the cost savings will be very much at all. However, I can think of one upside to a shorter ball: Your members might start blaming their equipment, rather than course conditions, for their poor play.

Yeah, right.

**COURSE CONDITIONS ARE TOO GOOD.** It isn't only improvements in golf equipment that are responsible for longer shots. We're partly to blame, as well. Within the last 25 years, many agronomic practices first used on putting surfaces have found their way onto fairways, resulting in better, faster conditions from tee to green. In fact, to everyone now promoting “firm and fast” conditions on America's courses I say, “What do you think we've been doing the last quarter century?”

Think the ball goes too far on its own? How about these advances:

- Thanks to better information, education, and science, we are all capable of maintaining excep-

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tionally well-prepared playing surfaces.

- **Mowing.** The equipment we use and what we know about mowing (when, how, how often) has changed tremendously. We have multi-bladed, multi-head machines that cost more than \$50,000 rolling down our fairways every week. Even the USGA Green Section promotes light-weight mowing as a way to enhance quality.

- **Irrigation.** We can add water where and when we want almost at will. And with modern drainage techniques and water-removal equipment, we can remove water and dry fairways faster.

- **Chemistry.** Plant-growth regulators and other advances in turf science mean grass can be

cut shorter and maintained in better conditions longer.

- **Sand-top dressing.** It's easy to get firm, fast playing surfaces thanks to sand. Think how dry, sandy soil does at the Open Championship each year, or look at the recent Presidents Cup Matches held in the Australian sand belt.

**A SHORTER BALL IS NECESSARY TO GROW THE GAME.** Blaming the ball for golf's inability to grow is like blaming the iceberg for sinking the Titanic.

Let's be honest: Golf is hard, takes time to play, takes time to learn and is expensive. I agree with many of the initiatives proposed to save the game, from Play It Forward to The First Tee, Embrace Golf 20 to "brown

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is the new green." But I don't believe rolling back the distance of the golf ball will convince the millions of potential golfers sitting on the sidelines that the game is suddenly right for them.

In fact, if anything, new golfers should be playing the longest ball possible:

- Who doesn't like to watch a well-struck drive (or any other well-struck shot) go a long way?

The thrill of doing it once makes you want to do it again, and that will get people to play more golf and spend more money doing so.

- **Beginners** need to see regular improvement if they're going to stick with the game. Shorten the ball and you might as well give new golfers a tennis racket, instead.

- **As important** as new players are to the game's long-term growth, don't overlook the importance of keeping existing golfers in love with the game. Cut 10 percent off the distance of the ball and you cut more than 10 percent of a person's love for golf.

I know I'd be more than 10 percent ticked off. **GCI**

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