

Designs on Golf

■ ARCHITECTURE

Ely Callaway's determination to fracture the rules of golf cannot transpire if you believe the game's tradition, as well as its future, are important. This isn't the first equipment controversy, but it's by far the most dangerous.

Equipment controversies have always been part of the game, and golf has survived — even thrived — off technological advances. For the first time, however, someone is consciously trying to undermine the USGA and put a profit-driven corporation in control of the game.

Callaway Golf's statement about the "Rule 35" ball and the ERC driver implies that the USGA is stifling free trade. The company believes the blue blazers want to prevent average golfers from enjoying this one-time, special Callaway product that will only help "recreational golfers." Of course, the ERC is only the beginning of the nonconforming products Callaway wants to introduce.

If Callaway is allowed to stretch the game further, existing golf courses will lose their strategic interest. Most layouts will not call on the interesting shots intended by the architect. Future courses will be impractical 8,500-yard monsters that will take six hours to play on a fast day. Environmentalists will turn on the game more than ever as new layouts use up more land and waste more water at a time when we need to be using less irrigation. Like a rubber band, golf can only stretch so much before it snaps.

The turnover rate of golfers entering and leaving the game will change as golf already takes too long, is too expensive and is too difficult for most people to play. Forget 3 million a year taking up the game and 3 million quitting. Make that 4 million a year quitting because they will become discouraged when they can't afford certain clubs and don't have time to spare for a six-hour round.

Ely Callaway believes the ends (his corporate profits) justifies the means (burying long-standing rules that have held the game together). Unfettered commerce is the only system that makes sense to men like Callaway, but we saw how well that has worked in the California energy market.

Why the USGA Must Prevail

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



IF CALLAWAY IS
ALLOWED TO
STRETCH THE GAME
FURTHER, EXISTING
COURSES WILL LOSE
THEIR STRATEGIC
INTEREST

The power companies felt the same way about the rules governing energy distribution in California that Callaway does about golf's rules. They were a pain and stood in the way of joy, happiness and lower rates for customers. So the state deregulated, and, as we all know, things haven't turned out well for the Golden State.

The same rules question applies to the Florida recount. One could argue that both sides fidgeted, stretched and in some cases tried to circumvent the rules when they didn't like the outcome. But we had a judicial system that ultimately stepped in and order was restored.

The USGA functions as golf's judicial system. It's the only governing body in the sport that can put its personal preferences aside and do what is right for the game's present and future.

Ely Callaway has decided he doesn't like the rules of golf, so he has set out to use his marketing and financial machine to move them out of his way. Problem is, he entered the golf business knowing these rules were in place. In the late 1980s, he even supported the USGA during the Ping square-groove controversy. The language stating that a club cannot serve as a "trampoline" or "spring" have been in the rule book for a years. Now that such wording interferes with Callaway's sales and growth projections for 2001, his support for the rule has eroded.

Ely Callaway is dangerous to golf. Regardless of how you feel about our friends in Far Hills, N.J., the USGA needs the golf industry's support. Without that support, the integrity of the game we work so hard to preserve will be completely destroyed.

Geoff Shackelford's new book is Alister MacKenzie's Cypress Point club. He can be reached at geoffshackelford@aol.com