

*The Case for the*  
**CLASSIC  
COURSE BALL**

The golf industry can take a step forward by taking a step backward and adopting a restrictive ball

**BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR**



**G**olf's greatest asset? The politically correct, feel-good answer is obvious: the people. Without those devoted hackers in their sweat-stained bucket caps whizzing around in GPS-guided golf cars, there would be no golf. Right?

Well, without golf courses, there would be no place for those people to play. So courses are golf's greatest asset.

And how are the governing bodies and the golfers showing their love for golf's architecture? By suggesting that courses are easier to alter than the equipment rules.

What *love*.

These complicated venues are the grandest and most unique in the world of sport. Many are so beautiful and fascinating and enduring to their regular customers that they can safely be called works of art. Most are maintained to a daily standard considered unfathomable not long ago.

The fine line between a course that functions as it was intended vs. one that doesn't measure up is now muddied by constant distance increases. Golf courses feel compelled to adapt to changes in equipment while the USGA has watched and supported this absurd development. Meanwhile, the USGA's incomplete testing procedures have made the golfer's equipment become nearly as important as his skill.

Thus, many lovingly built and maintained courses — most serving the sport admirably for decades — are purportedly letting us down because they can't withstand an assault from today's equipment. But it's not just old courses that can't keep up.

One layout hosting a PGA Tour event this fall was recently lengthened (at its own expense) to add yardage in a mad race to keep up with this year's hot ball and driver. The course in question hasn't been open for a year.

Here's what golf has come to: The 150 or more acres that were painstakingly constructed must be modified to make room for equipment "progress." Apparently, buying the latest equipment gives golfers genuine happiness and hope through these new consumables. So tees are added, fairways narrowed, rough cul-

tivated like a crop and trees planted — all to confine distance increases both real and perceived.

Why have golf's governing bodies shrugged off the apparent silliness of placing a burden on courses to keep up? Because it costs them less. Don't they mind that they've had a hand in changing golf's Wrigley Fields? Not only have they torn down the ivy-covered brick walls at many of our classics, but now they're buying the real estate in the neighborhoods beyond center field to expand their playing fields — all to prevent frivolous lawsuits from a few manufacturers.

Even more disturbing is the notion that the "legal guardians" of golf have bought into the marketing spin that equipment advances have made this hard game more accessible and popular for the masses. Unfortunately, the various economic indicators and surveys make it quite clear that the desire to get a 10-yard fix isn't providing golf with new customers or keeping others around.

And is golf great because, as Curtis Strange insisted recently, we can consume the same equipment the pros use? Don't beautiful courses, the joy of being outdoors, the camaraderie and an adventuresome round play a part, too?

### **Can't keep up**

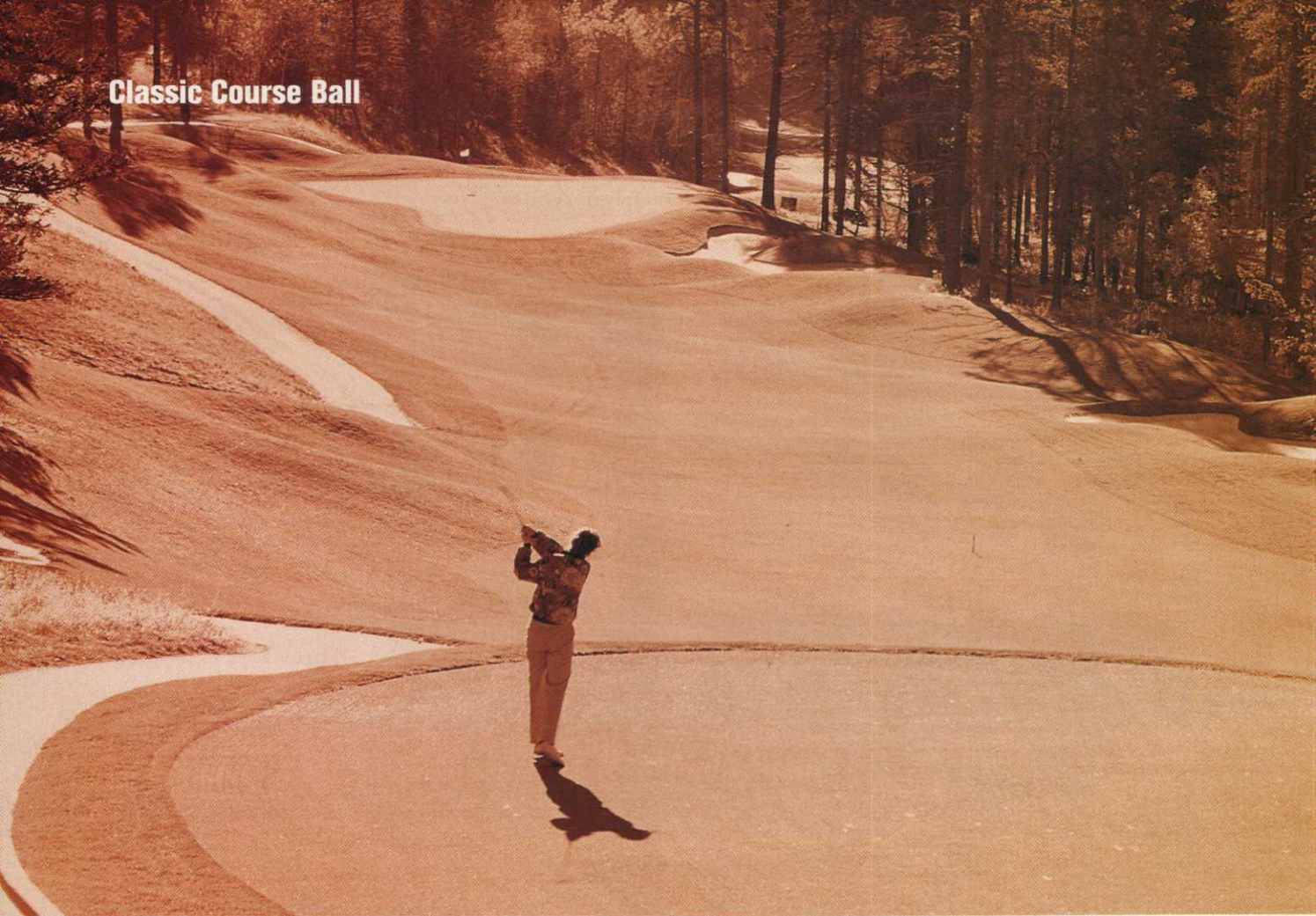
Technology in the form of new clubs, balls and machines that better fit player launch angles has allowed good players to hit the ball distances unimaginable just three years ago. The USGA is unable to test refined launch-angle conditions tailored to individual swings, which is how the companies have circumvented the USGA's testing limits (and will continue to even under the new USGA testing guidelines).

Distance increases have empowered many average golfers to think they are longer and better than they really are. Courses are then expected to ensure the integrity of slope so that handicaps "travel well" and so the layout remains "respectable."

Because better players who drive the ball longer and straighter are considered golf's voices of reason, many have bought into the

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USGA's suggestion that courses are easier to change than the testing.

### **Effects of distance increases**

Restoration projects are changing focus. More and more projects have not expanded green square footage or widened fairways because such expanded areas of short grass might make the course unable to "defend itself" against the latest equipment. Renovation projects or new courses are looking for distance and other methods to rig the design so that a certain course rating or back tee yardage is produced. Making the design more fun gets lost in the numbers race.

Already an expensive endeavor, architecture has been deemed easiest to handle the expense of this ever-changing game. The equipment manufacturers, which believe it is their birthright to sell the latest balls and drivers, contribute only complaints that the industry is not bringing new customers to golf.

### **Pandering isn't working**

As architect Max Behr said in 1927: "The seller of goods generally panders to the blind instincts of his customers. Rarely do we find him

an artist considering what the result must be when his goods reach their destination. And the blind instinct that he catered to was an insane desire to merely hit the ball a long way."

Yes, every golfer loves the distance boost he gets. But distance fixes have not been enough. Every study suggests that golf is losing customers because of the excessive time it takes to play, the high cost of rounds, expensive equipment and the difficulty of the sport. These insidious elements can all be tied to the rubber-band effect on golf courses, where designs are stretched and narrowed to combat distance.

Only a handful of people in the golf industry see the expansion of courses as a good thing. In a survival move, the golf magazines have avoided meaningful discussion of the issue. If this essay appeared in one of the mass-market publications, the magazine's relationship with several equipment manufacturers would end. Certain companies have made it clear that even suggesting a cap on distance is slanderous (even if the suggestion comes from Jack Nicklaus).

The American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA) continues to express con-

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cern for placing the distance burden on golf courses. Though ASGCA members could profit from a wave of jobs retrofitting courses for the latest meteorite of a ball, most have taken the high road out of respect for tradition.

The USGA Green Section will continue on and the U.S. Open will remain one of the four

Majors, but the USGA's once respected place in the sport has been undermined by its complacency and arrogance in shrugging off repeated pleas from folks like Jack Nicklaus, Tom Watson and Ben Crenshaw.

The PGA Tour is only interested in one charity: itself. When pro golf becomes as dreadful to watch as the power-dominated pro tennis game is today (closer than they realize), the Tour will do something. But by then it'll be too late.

### **A backdoor solution**

The golf course industry can separate itself from this nonsense and lay the groundwork for a future that emphasizes the joy of playing golf, with equipment a secondary issue. Golf professionals, superintendents, architects, administrators, committee types and even golf car boys who want to secure golf's future can reverse the trend of declining rounds and expanding courses. Or at the least they can start spreading the word so the sport can become the focus again.

How do we take golf back from the manufacturers? Look to Softspikes. The golf course industry single-handedly campaigned for and implemented the ban on metal spikes to improve turf conditions. More than 12,000 courses now ban metal spikes, and all because it started on (big pun warning here) a grassroots level.

The same can happen with the golf ball. Introducing — the Classic Course Ball.

Here's how it could work. Every time the topic of adding new bunkers or planting trees comes up this fall, winter and spring, ask the people in favor of these costly rigging devices if they would instead play a ball that reverts back to 1995 distances.

Many will say they would be open to such an idea as an alternative to a costly renovation. But be prepared for a reminder speech detailing how noble they are, but that they can't envision other golfers going along with the idea. Nod and say, thanks.

That's all you have to do. Plant the idea. Put it out there as an alternative to all of the silly ideas suggested to offset increasing distance. A distance rollback will only work by making golfers think they came up with the idea.

And how exactly would such a restricted ball work within the rules of golf? Courses would invoke a local rule that the Classic Course Ball is to be used while all eight million other

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USGA rules can still apply. Naturally, a regular foursome will have to agree as one to use the ball to have a fair match, and all players in the club championship would have to use the ball if the course in question embraced the ball.

What about handicaps? As we know, course ratings, slope and handicaps are important. Courses would have to be rerated based on such a ball. This will feed into the accountant approach most golfers take to their courses. They can rejoice when the course rating and slope go up after the local association finds the course playing tougher with the new (old playing characteristics) ball. Handicaps will travel well again. All will be right with the world.

Who will make the Classic Course Ball? A shrewd company that's willing to take a low-risk chance. By being "the first," the company will dominate the initial market and secure brand recognition.

This "first" manufacturer will have a patent on the ball, and someone like Hootie Johnson might turn to it when he gets tired of rearranging Augusta National each summer. And

if it's really bright, this company will work closely with PGA of America professionals to establish the ball at its courses.

Think about it. Company A introduces the Classic Course Ball and a prestigious club like Pine Valley or Cypress Point starts selling it in their shops. Members use it in the club championship or invitational. Word gets out.

Then the ball is used in a tournament, maybe the local city amateur or a college event. Good players jump on the bandwagon, followed immediately by those who think they're good players.

Suddenly, that ball is going to become pretty cool at any course — public or private — under 7,100 yards. What does the golf industry have to lose by asking golfers to take this minor step backward?

The numbers are all down and despite claims that technology makes golf more fun, it is not sustaining play and never will. Fun rounds of golf that don't take all day will keep people in the sport — not the dream of another 10-yard distance fix. ■



DIGITAL STOCK

Certain companies have made it clear that even suggesting a cap on distance is slanderous (even if the suggestion comes from Jack Nicklaus).

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