

Time for an Annual Review

It started off great, what with Phil winning the Masters.
But things started to get ugly around U.S. Open time

By Geoff Shackelford, Contributing Editor

It started off so promising. There was an exciting West Coast swing and an increase in spring rounds played.

There was Phil Mickelson's brilliant Masters win on a retro Sunday in Augusta, followed by a stellar leader board heading into U.S. Open weekend.

Then the USGA lost its mind and lost control of Shinnecock Hills, and in the second half of the year golf seemed to serve as a constant reminder of the many issues facing the game on both the professional and recreational levels.

Actually, the stitches began to come undone the week prior to the Open. The pain had to do with slow golf. At the Buick-sponsored tour event formerly known as the Westchester Classic, twosomes took five hours to play Saturday's third round. The tour's finest waited for upwards of 20 minutes on tees as most of the field attempted to drive two short par-4s. The course's two par 5s were also reachable in two for most of the field and added to congestion problems. It all prompted a grumpy Fred Couples to say, "I wouldn't have come out and watched today. You might as well have stayed home."

The worst-kept secret in golf is that slow play is undermining the sport's popularity like never before. Golf courses that host the top players and even everyday layouts designed with certain driving distances in mind have become out-

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dated. The result? Lots of waiting. Why the waiting? Because people are hitting it longer. Even everyday golfers are starting to see genuine benefits from equipment, thanks in part to the use of launch-monitor club-fitting technology.

The real eye-opener at the Buick event came from PGA Tour official Slugger White, who probably was reprimanded for concluding after the round that the slow play was caused by extreme driving distances. "We've got a situation now where I really feel like the ball is going too far," he said. "We've got guys driving the ball farther than they ever have."

The year saw many in golf coming to grips with the notion that golf manufacturers have little interest in the everyday game. More prominent golfers and officials joined the chorus of traditionalists calling upon the governing bodies to regulate distance to preserve vital traditions and ensure a healthy future for the sport.

Among those in 2004 suggesting a rollback in distance or a "tournament ball" to end the madness of lengthening and narrowing courses were Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Nick Price, Tom Weiskopf, Deane Beman and Tiger Woods.

Yes, that's right, Tiger tried to bring up the issue, first in a press conference and a week later on the ABC prime-time telecast of "Battle of the Bridges." Yet golf magazines mysteriously did not report on his rather startling and simple solution.

"I think you should put a limit on the speed of a golf ball, the spin rate of a golf ball," Woods said in comments obviously choreographed with his biggest sponsor, Nike. "You can increase the spin of the golf ball and make it so that we don't hit the ball as far. You can decrease the speed of the core. There are different ways you can get around it so that we're all playing under certain speed limits. Hopefully that will be the answer to a lot of the problems that we're having with golf course design around the world."

At public courses and country clubs across the land, superintendents reported increasing pressure to deal with the distance issue. The Golf Course Superintendent Association of America's (GCSAA) annual survey found that 28 percent of superintendents polled said "maintenance of their course changed to compensate for the increasing distance of golf balls." That's up 10 percent from 2003.

Many superintendents reported anecdotal evidence of



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The green of the par-3 seventh hole at Shinnecock was as slick as an ice-skating rink during the U.S. Open.

increased driving distance by more golfers. They said that some places accustomed to parking golf cars while waiting for other groups to tee off were no longer safe. They also said that tees once out of reach from parallel fairways are now design issues in need of analysis (and protective fencing).

The list of unfortunate symptoms related to the distance chase is long, but the saddest continues to be the lack of attention paid to the significant upgrade in course maintenance across the United States compared to a decade ago. Sure, a few courses are still not in great shape and many are cutting back on basics such as bunker raking, but, by and large, maintenance has never been better.

Where are the watchdogs?

The good news for the struggling golf business is that several prominent voices have taken notice of the connection between distance, cost and the overall commercial atmosphere driven by manufacturers. They have made the connection and understand how the situation is scaring off long-time and beginning players.

"You can be anti-technology when it comes to golf, without being one of those uncompromising purists who thinks we should go back to hickory shafts," wrote *Washington Post* columnist Sally Jenkins. "Which of us doesn't long for the days when a par 4 was supposed to be played ... in four strokes?"

"The real problem with golf is not science itself, but that it's been applied to the game so rampantly by equipment

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companies interested only in selling the 'newest' clubs and balls for even higher prices. They don't care if Augusta is stretched to the point of ruin, or if a 480-yard hole has to be turned into a par 4. They just want to move product. In no other sport are the equipment manufacturers so influential when it comes to how the game is played. Spalding and Nike don't control basketball. But the equipment companies in golf have enormous sway via advertising and sponsorship dollars, and they are the chief obstacle to reform."

On the reform front, the governing bodies continued to run scared this year. The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews made clear it has no intention of doing anything. The USGA rolled out a new Phase II ball test, and PGA Tour driving distances did not decrease. (You must go down to 89th place in the driving distance stats to find someone *averaging* under 290 yards off the tee!)

The PGA Tour is too worried about its upcoming television contract negotiations to step into the battle. While the other assorted bodies wheel out fog-filtered ads about all that they're doing to grow the game, it has become apparent there isn't much point to introducing a poor inner-city child to the game if it's going to cost nearly \$1,000 for a starter set of clubs.

Yes, that's right, Nike unveiled a starter set that cost \$897 — and bragged about it in a press release. Taylor Made unveiled a \$799 driver. Meanwhile, Callaway began a nose-dive that saw Wall Street dumping its stock, while ball giant Titleist continued to rake in the profits and rail against any form of regulation that might restore some sanity to the sport.

"The concomitant pressure to innovate faster and faster, repeatedly recapturing the consumer imagination while not angering buyers with computer industry-style speedy obsolescence, makes golf one of the most difficult subsegments in the leisure products market," wrote Golf Channel equipment editor Adam Barr. "And faster (read: more expensive) innovation leads to more late-model closeouts and — you guessed it — more downward price pressure."

Translation: The golf equipment industry is moving from the already insidious Wall Street-driven concept of "planned obsolescence" (they don't make 'em like they used to) to a cycle that calls on rapid innovation and flashy marketing designed to make golfers feel as if they're using obsolete equipment if they haven't picked up this month's newest drivers.



MIKE KLEMM

Whistling Straits, site of the 2004 PGA Championship, ranked high on *Golf Digest's* Top 100 Courses You Can Play list.

Here's the kicker (and reason to not own Callaway stock): The cycles are moving so fast that the companies are no longer able to exploit the suggested retail price long enough to produce expected earnings. The dwindling number of golfers combined with less enthusiasm from avid players to constantly buy the latest clubs produces plenty of surplus and weak profit margins for the manufacturers.

Winners are ...

On the architecture front, *Golf Digest's* Best New Course competition continued to generate plenty of buzz. Jim Engh's The Club at Black Rock in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, upset two courses almost surely destined for Top 100 lists: Tom Fazio's Dallas National and Bill Coore-Ben Crenshaw's Friars Head on Long Island. Tom Weiskopf's Forest Dunes earned the Best New Resort Course Award while Baxter Spann's Black Mesa in New Mexico took the Best New Affordable Award.

Speaking of affordable golf, *Golf Magazine* unveiled its list of the Top 100 Courses You Can Play. Average in-season green fee: \$191. Perhaps feeling guilty, the magazine thankfully offered up a new list, the Nifty 50 courses under \$50 that are worth playing.

The year ended up with Vijay Singh establishing himself as the best golfer in the world, the American Ryder Cup putting on a dreadful performance at immaculate Oakland Hills, but an overall sense that Americans are finally taking notice of key issues that face what is still a great sport and a fine business in which to be part. ■

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