The Much Bigger Golf Business

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

The golf course business (green fees, dues, initiation, food and beverage revenue) generates around $16 billion annually. The golf course maintenance industry (labor, products) is a $9 billion annual business. The golf equipment trade (balls, drivers, Pat Boone white shoes) produces around $4 billion a year in sales.

Final score: golf course industry, $25 billion; equipment business, $4 billion.

Yet the golf course industry has quietly spent the last 80 years lengthening its courses, narrowing its fairways and, in general, responding to equipment advances at the expense of fun and affordable golf. Meanwhile, the USGA and PGA Tour tip-toe around the equipment manufacturers, fearful of upsetting companies that employ a tiny American work force and who generate a small percentage of golf industry revenues.

Two years ago, the USGA dropped its "optimization" ball test that would have put an end to companies skirting around its outdated Iron Byron test. The USGA scrapped this progressive test in favor of a refined Iron Byron, which has since been refined to work around balls already on the marketplace while leaving room for more innovation (i.e., distance).

The PGA Tour has adopted voluntary driver testing starting in 2004. The optional procedure puts an end to the revered tradition of pro golfers policing themselves. That's a big price to pay just to avoid upsetting manufacturers who can't be trusted to give their players conforming clubs.

The governing bodies and professional tours show absolutely no concern for the affects their policies have or will continue to have on the golf course industry. Layouts of all kinds have never been better conditioned on such a widespread basis, yet that's not enough. They need to get longer, narrower, faster, softer and fairer — all to keep up with the deregulated equipment industry.

Over the past 80 years, the golf course industry has responded with plenty of "championship," 7,000-yard, hard-equals-good, thread-the-needle, five-hour-round layouts. But the industry has not responded with nearly enough walkable, quirky, 6,200-yard courses with wide fairways and three-hour rounds.

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Some will point to how golf has grown thanks to equipment advances. We've all heard that golf has gone from 3.5 million players in the 1950s to nearly 27 million today.

The number is more like this: 3.5 million avid golfers back then and 5.9 million avid golfers today.

We heard again in 2003 from the higher-ups that golf will only attract new players and keep the alumni happy if everyone can buy the latest $500 driver or the latest $4 ball that the pros use. That freedom to buy what Tiger and Phil play is the "great thing" about golf, bellowed Curtis Strange during one of many lackluster 2003 golf telecasts.

However, 2004 might be the year something happens. USGA spokesman Marty Parkes confirms that the governing body is considering an addition to the rules that would allow tournament committees to invoke a local rule similar to the existing "one-ball condition."

This means tournament committees or courses could play by USGA rules, while giving them the right to require that a restricted flight competition or Classic Course Ball be used.

If such a ball is introduced and used at a famous club (or perhaps the Masters), a monumental message will be sent: that golf is played to experience the joy of taking on a design, and furthermore golf courses no longer will work around the needs of equipment manufacturers, who are opposed to regulation of any kind.

Ironically, if the golf business stabilizes or grows thanks to a legitimate focus on fun, affordability and shorter rounds, these same equipment industry folks might grow their little $4 billion industry. But they have a long way to go before catching up to the much bigger golf course business.

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