

Annual Review

The good (more dialogue),
the bad (increased costs),
and the ugly (slow play)
of 2005 – and plenty more

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Maybe it was Abe Lincoln. Or John Wooden. Someone said we should never confuse change with progress. But another year in the golf industry seemed to prove that those with the most influence view change as progress.

Unfortunately, that change tends to include rising costs, slower play and little concern for the plight of golf course owners.

There was, however, more dialogue in 2005. Issues were debated with a goal toward securing the game's long-term health.

Rounds look like they'll finish about flat, but avid golfers are playing less. While the expense of playing is coming down via flat or lowered green fees, course owners and even established country clubs report that slow play problems and the perception that golf takes too long continue to impact rounds played.

Since slow play starts at the PGA Tour and works its way down to the daily-fee round, operators can take heart in the cranky 2005 comments of Tiger Woods, who captured the Masters and British Open, and finished second and fourth in the U.S. Open and PGA Championships, respectively.

"Our Tour is so slow," he said after another deliberate round. "Welcome to the PGA Tour, five plus."

And anyone watching the Booze Allen Classic at Congressional Country Club will never forget the antics of Rory Sabbatini, who played half a hole ahead of his infamously sluggish playing partner Ben Crane. The unsavory incident was initially thought to be an embarrassment for a sport priding itself on gentlemanly sportsmanship, but the ensuing national debate may prove to be a good thing.

At January's PGA Show in Orlando, golf industry



Tiger Woods
says the Tour
is too slow.
No kidding!

titans convened for a lightly attended seminar to discuss the state of the game.

"You might want to do this a little later in the day next time, hopefully get a few more people here, but thanks to all of you who did come out," said Fred Ridley, outgoing president of the United States Golf Association (USGA).

Besides several shows of mutual admiration among the panelists along with light applause for their efforts on behalf of women and minorities, the annoying topic of technology and its impact on golf courses came up. Audience members chimed in.

"The lustiest cheer came when a Michigan woman, the owner of a 27-hole course, lamented how the new balls and space-age equipment were rendering her 1960s-built course obsolete," reported Cybergolf's Jeff Shelley.

"You need more acreage, and maintenance costs are higher (when managing more turf) for both accurate golfers and high handicappers," the woman said. "One guy with a hot club and a hot ball will slow play for everyone else."

She also mentioned increased liability problems for course owners and directed her remarks to the USGA's Ridley. The course owner explained that when her course was built, homes lining the fairways were plotted when 250 yards was the longest drive. With 350 yards the longest drive now, the course faces safety and liability concerns.

Ridley said the issue has been going on for 100 years, and that the USGA has done more in the past seven years to deal with it than the previous century combined.

"We really haven't seen the types of increases in the past couple of years that we saw back in the 1990s," he said.

Actually, the 1999 Tour average was 271 yards and the 2005 Tour average was 288.9 yards, up almost 2 yards from last year despite 18 rain-delayed events in an

unusually wet year across the country. A Tour record 26 players finished with drives averaging more than 300 yards.

A Golf Datatech consumer survey found that 37 percent of those questioned believed distance is threatening the integrity of the professional game, up 6 percent from the year before. A surprising 45 percent say they would support limits on equipment for the pros only.

But the USGA's Ridley told the PGA Show audience there were signs that all of the technology talk didn't matter because golf is on the comeback trail.

"I think we've seen corporate involvement and corporate spending starting to come back," he said. "I know in our environment that has certainly been evident at our championships. Certainly, for the U.S. Open, we are going to have a terrific year at Pinehurst."

The U.S. Open was wonderfully successful thanks in large part to the fine efforts of the Pinehurst team to pull the course together despite dreadful spring growing conditions. Michael Campbell won on a thrilling final day that saw players combat the famed Donald Ross course in an unusual way: drive as far as you can, regardless of where the fairway or hole location is.

The "flogging" approach became apparent at Doral Golf Resort early in the year where Woods and Phil Mickelson engaged in an epic dual, but was actually started by Vijay Singh, who grew tired of trying to keep his drives in between the Tour's increasingly narrowed fairways.

Here's what Tiger said about flogging after the round to NBC: "Because of the hole locations, even if you put the ball in the fairway, it's still unbelievably difficult to get close to. So even if I drive it in the rough, it's no big deal. I have a 60-degree sand wedge in my hand and figure I can hack it up there and make birdie."

Pinehurst offered a chance to see how much the game has changed in the six years since it last hosted the U.S. Open. In 1999 the field hit 38.8 percent of the fairways, 40.6 percent of greens in regulation and averaged 268.0. In 2005 the field hit 30 percent of fairways, 43.3 percent of greens and averaged 300.3 yards off the tee.

The U.S. Open marked the swan song for the USGA's infamous course setup man, Tom Meeks, and ushered in the era of Mike Davis. The Open also provided the USGA a chance to explain how the organization is on the cutting edge of research. In an NBC pre-packaged segment, senior tech guru Dick Rugge likened the golf ball to a train that has stopped at many stations, and said, "We think we've stopped it in the right station right now."

Executive Director David Fay told audiences that the USGA was 2.5 years into a research project and that things haven't changed, though it was interesting to note that the USGA reminded viewers that it has drawn the line on

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distance before it embarked on the research project.

In April the USGA asked manufacturers to submit "rolled back" balls for testing as part of the research program. As of September, none had complied. Because the problem remains a simple one: Manufacturers have been able to design a ball that passes the USGA overall distance standard under the stipulated launch conditions but exceeds the distance standard under different launch conditions. In other words, some people are driving 80 mph and the radar gun still says 55 mph.

Golf's 2005 majors proved unusually memorable, with a wild Masters shootout between Woods and Chris DiMarco, eventually won by Woods with a birdie on the first sudden-death playoff hole.

The Masters also saw the classy, understated farewell of Jack Nicklaus, who was visibly emotional coming up Augusta's ninth hole during Saturday morning's rain-delayed play.

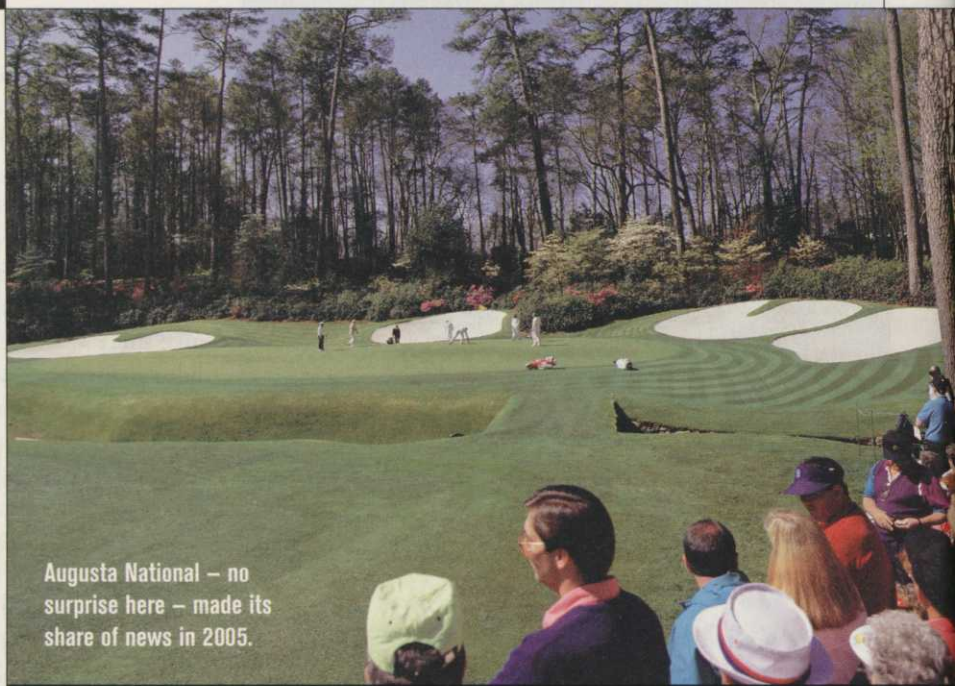
Afterward, Nicklaus said: "Unless I can gain 10 mph more clubhead speed, then I'm not coming back. How is that? I don't think that's going to happen."

The other real star of Masters week was the SubAir subsurface aeration system that kept Augusta's surfaces firm despite torrential rains. The Golf Channel, doing its typically fine job during Major coverage, went behind the scenes and allowed SubAir to show off its remarkable product, which was invented and patented by Augusta's Marsh Benson.

The PGA Tour has since announced that SubAir systems will be part of its \$26 million major TPC Sawgrass renovation, which starts the day after the 2006 Players Championship and includes a massive golf course overhaul to be supervised by Pete Dye.

The British Open saw another Nicklaus farewell, this time on the grandest stage in all of sport. With bright sun and fans filling every open space around the final hole at St. Andrews, Nicklaus' unforgettable birdie on the final hole made for a fitting conclusion to his career in the Open Championship.

Woods put on his second straight dominating performance at St. Andrews, though it was the meticulously groomed Old Course that got more attention than usual thanks to the Royal and Ancient Golf Club's setup antics.



Augusta National — no surprise here — made its share of news in 2005.

Forced to lengthen the course, tees were built outside the Old Course's well-defined boundaries. In an unprecedented move, the R&A introduced a "moveable" out-of-bounds line between the first and second holes to preserve traditional boundaries.

And you thought your green committee was a little nutty?

The R&A also introduced defined fairway contours on a course long known for its absence of such man-made interference. The fourth hole featured a 290-yard carry while the infamous Road Hole (17th) saw its fairway end at 300 yards from the tee, forcing players to lay back so that the R&A could claim that distance had not made the Old Course obsolete.

The battle to host a major championship became even more fierce this year when the PGA of America dropped 2010 host Sahalee Country Club in favor of new favorite Whistling Straits.

Meanwhile, the USGA is already eyeing the highly anticipated Erin Hills Golf Course outside Milwaukee. The rolling, links-like public course is a Dana Fry-Michael Hurdzan-Ron Whitten design that can be stretched to 8,000 yards. The USGA has already awarded it a Women's Mid-Amateur, with a U.S. Open looking like a possibility somewhere in the near future. Best of all, the Erin Hills ownership wants to keep green fees at the course affordable.

Other public venues were in the spotlight as well. San Francisco's renovated Harding Park course cost the city \$16 million to spruce up, but the resulting American Express Championship proved to be one of the year's best

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Tour events with huge, festive crowds turning out to watch Woods and John Daly show that golf can be exciting when played on a stage accessible to daily-fee players.

Things weren't so rosy south of Harding Park in San Diego, where the renovation of Torrey Pines South has left residents bitter. The San Diego City Council voted down a North Course redo, 9-0, after residents complained that South Course conditions had deteriorated since the greens were rebuilt to USGA specs. They also argued that the North Course was still fun to play, while the South — host to the 2008 U.S. Open — was not.

"I am struck by the fact that we were asked to approve these changes before there was a design," said Councilman Brian Maienschein of the proposed North Course. "Why do you need an architect like Rees Jones to do maintenance work? I played baseball, and when they talked about maintaining the field, they weren't moving the bases 80 or 100 feet."

Torrey Pines brought in maintenance guru Ted Horton, who helped lead the South in a better direction in time for January's Buick Invitational.

Golf lost several noted figures in 2005, including master golf writer Herbert Warren Wind, architects Jack Arthur Snyder, Floyd Farley and rising star Mike Strantz. Strantz, a North Carolina resident, had just opened his finest achievement, the redesign of Monterey Peninsula's Shore Course. Taking the outdated 1960 Bob Baldock design, Strantz rerouted the holes familiar to 17-Mile Drive tourists and injected his unique style of native plantings, vast sandy waste areas and rolling greens to transform the Shore into a model for future course redesign work.

Which just happens to be the next big trend in design: bring your course into the new century with a fresh look. The American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA) new president, Tom Marzolf, is preaching that courses

establish long-range plans and "life-cycle planning" to prevent reaching the stage that many layouts have: tired or deteriorated conditions that only a costly redo can fix.

Part of Marzolf's emphasis is to ensure that courses better account for aging components of their design, such as irrigation and improved drainage, to lessen the need for cost future expenditures.

The most bizarre aspect of the redesign trend may be the number of courses bringing their original architects back to liven up their own works or to fix mistakes made. *Golf Digest's* Ron Whitten wrote about finding the trend fascinating since so many architects are getting second chances. He cited *Golf Digest's* Best New Course of 1985, Jack Nicklaus' Loxahatchee, where the course was framed by pointed knobs covered in plenty of lovegrass.

"I decided I really didn't like them," Nicklaus said when announcing that he was being brought in to redo his own design. "So we tried to modernize it, bring it into the framework of today's game."

Another striking aspect of the redesign trend is the skyrocketing cost of fixing up an existing course. Donald Trump estimated (with pride) that the redesign of one hole at his "re-branded" Trump National Los Angeles design cost \$61 million.

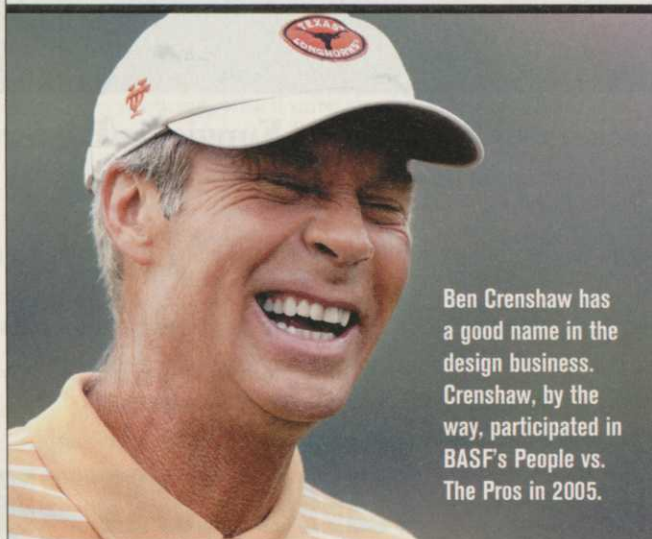
The Golf Resort at Indian Wells and the city of the same name announced they were embarking on a planned \$45 million renovation. *The Desert Sun* reported that "some changes in store for the public golf resort are an \$18 million course expansion that will add six new holes to the existing 18-hole course. The rest of the \$45 million will be used on a new clubhouse and colorful landscaping, such as wildflowers and tumbling waterfalls."

A comprehensive *Golf Business Monthly* story also opened many eyes by adding to the typical 19th-hole discussion on the value of name architects.

Dan Gleason wrote about South Carolina-based Sportometrics' intensive quantitative research on the value of a name designer. "There were 80 variables that went into a study that took into consideration the green fees charged at the courses designed by high-profile names and included both public green fees and private club guest fees. Ben Crenshaw's name generated the highest added value in the study."

He also quoted David Fry of WCI Communities, who put the celebrity designer debate into perspective. "I can't forecast the true value of the celebrity name of an architect," he says, "even after the course is operational and all the homes and memberships are sold. The bottom line is building a quality product, regardless of the name you put on the course. That's where the rubber really meets the road." ■

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Ben Crenshaw has a good name in the design business. Crenshaw, by the way, participated in BASF's People vs. The Pros in 2005.