



The Year
in Review

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On Second Thought

A commentary
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HEY, this sounds familiar.

Tiger Woods dominated again, winning two of four Majors and six straight PGA Tour events. The men's Majors were contested on well-conditioned layouts, with the hard work of crews and volunteers at Winged Foot Golf Club and Medinah Country Club singled out for heroic efforts despite tricky weather conditions.

On the women's side, players like Annika Sorrenstam, Karrie Webb, Lorena Ochoa and Michelle Wie helped the LPGA Tour continue its ascent despite a new commissioner who is alienating some of the tour's long-time tournament directors.

The architecture world once again greeted highly anticipated layouts like Sebonack, Ballyneal, Erin Hills and a slew of other high-priced projects.

And the game's powerbrokers continued to rake in big salaries while poo-pooing major issues like slow play, technology, water usage and the sport's accessibility.

But some things did change. Sort of.

Early in the year, the buzz centered around young bombers J.B. Holmes, Bubba Watson and Camillo Villegas. Remember them?

Their secret to their long-hitting prowess?

"I just like to sleep," Watson told ESPN.com. "I think Tiger and his caddie went out running yesterday. ... You won't see me doing that, and my caddie won't be running, either."

Holmes, who hit an eight-iron from 198 yards enroute to victory in Scottsdale, Ariz., was asked if he was a "weights and/or conditioning guy."

"No, not really," he said. "I ride the bike a little bit or whatever. I'm not really big on the weights and stuff."

Meanwhile, Tiger Woods told Golf Digest's Jaime Diaz that he didn't care for the demise of shot-making.

"I enjoy moving the ball and hitting different shots, and I think that's the way golf should be played," he said. "But the game has changed since I've been on tour. It's hard to make the ball move. You look at the old guys who are or were true shot-makers, like when I played with Lee Trevino at Bighorn and he blew my mind with some of the shots he hit. Then you look on Tour and you ask, 'Who's a true shot-maker? Who actually maneuvers the ball or does something different with it?' And there really aren't that many, if any, out here anymore."

Oddly, the early portion of 2006 included

Winged Foot Golf Club proved a formidable challenge for contestants of the 2006 U.S. Open.

Our intrepid architecture writer looks back on the highlights and lowlights of 2006

mea culpas from the governing bodies on the distance issue. They appeared to see its effects on both the pro and recreational games.

"The longest average drive has moved up about 20 yards in the last 10 years," conceded R&A secretary Peter Dawson to the press during the British Open. "The advent of the ProV1-type ball has most to do with it, along with the big-headed drivers. So do I think that the game at the top level — this elite few — would benefit from the ball being a little bit shorter? Yes, I do."

The United States Golf Association's (USGA) equipment testing guru Dick Rugge told The Asbury Park Press, "We are criticized, and probably rightfully so, for letting technology go too far over the past 10, 11 years or so."

Meanwhile, USGA Executive Committee member Jim Vernon told the group's annual gathering, "We know that the way the game is being played by accomplished players has changed dramatically in recent years. It is not just that driving distances have increased among elite players. What I am suggesting is that we need to reframe the discussion of how the game is being changed."

Then, mysteriously, the USGA unveiled a

Rugge-authored press release explaining "distance myths" and later suggested that U-shaped grooves were the real problem in golf because they encourage long hitters to swing away, knowing they will be able to spin their ball out of 4-inch rough.

In 2007, look for the USGA to prove that such a situation actually occurs.

The other major topic in early 2006 involved the PGA Tour's new television contract, which signaled the game isn't as popular as it used to be. The Golf Channel was locked in for a stunning 15 years of early-round coverage, while CBS and NBC remained involved with weekend coverage.

Rex Hoggard in *Golfweek* wrote: "Fifteen years? That's not a TV contract, that's alimony."

"If we're trying to reach out to non-golf fans, how you leave out ESPN is beyond me," David Duval told the Associated Press.

Of course, PGA Commissioner Tim Finchem put his usual tortured spin on matters.

"The Golf Channel brings a lot," he said in a press conference. "The reason for 15 years is that it sets the table for us to protect our position in the long term as the television marketplace continues to evolve."

Former USGA Executive Director Frank Hannigan offered a more refreshing take on *Golfobserver.com*: "The PGA Tour's new television deal confirms the obvious — general interest in golf peaked years ago and is now in decline. Recreational golf has been flat or worse in terms of rounds played for many years. The two are interdependent. For the Tour to find and command a new audience would require a freakish event — like a hermaphrodite dwarf becoming leading money winner. And it would help if the dwarf's cad-die could be Anna Nicole Smith."

The LPGA hired a new commissioner, and she made a splash in 2006, running off key staff members, upsetting the press with a ridiculous photo policy and angering several long-time tournament directors, leading to the demise of several events.

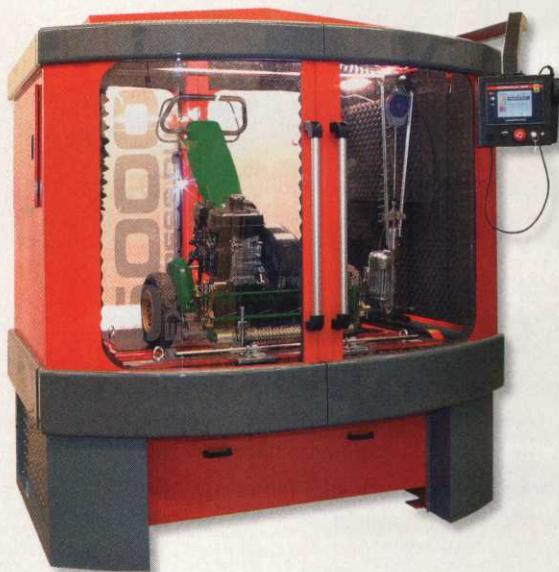
LPGA head Carolyn Bivens likes to talk down to everyone as if she's a CEO running a Fortune 500 company. And she showed real savvy in defending some of her initiatives to

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Tiger Woods dominated the Tour again. He also had plenty to say about the demise of shot-making.

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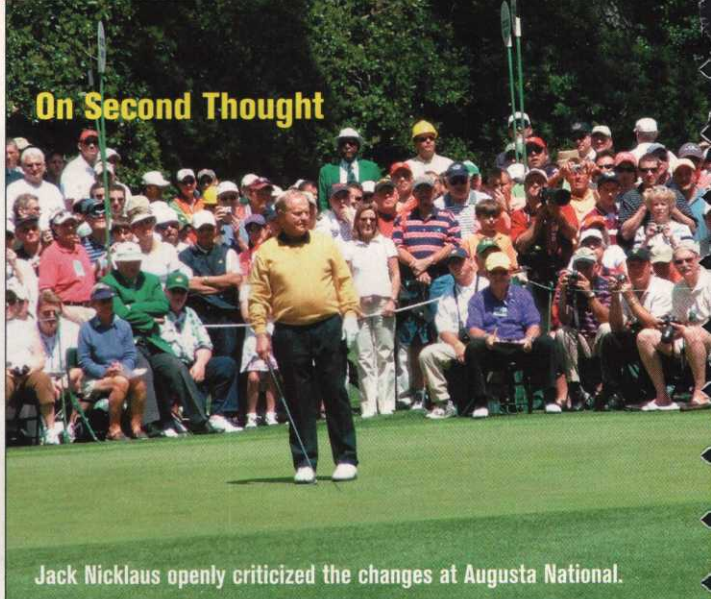
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SHARPER SOLUTIONS

On Second Thought



Jack Nicklaus openly criticized the changes at Augusta National.

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the Orlando Sentinel's Steve Elling: "We're trying to open endorsement opportunities to women. We're trying to raise purses. Isn't that appalling? My, my, go back in the kitchen."

The Masters arrived with a crashing sound, as former champions Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer were critical of the many design changes made under Augusta National Chairman Hootie Johnson, who retired and handed the reins to Billy Payne.

"They've totally eliminated what Bobby Jones tried to do in the game of golf," Nicklaus said in *Golf Digest*. "Bobby Jones believed golf was primarily a second-shot game. He believed that you should have enough room to drive the ball onto the fairway, but if you put it on the correct side of the fairway, you had an advantage to put the ball toward the hole."

The floodgates were opened, and several current players chimed in as well. Said Mike Weir in *The Toronto Sun*, "I'm sure if Bobby Jones was still around, it would be like, 'What are you guys doing?'"

Word also leaked that the club is buying homes in a nearby neighborhood to possibly shift a road so the fifth hole can be lengthened.

Around the same time, word got out that the Ohio Golf Association would be playing its Champions Tournament with a limited-flight ball in order to study a possible rollback and other ramifications of impacting the distance chase that has so adversely affected courses like Augusta National.

The August event was far from a perfect example of how a rollback might work, but the player comments revealed that such a rollback might bring the desired effect of restoring at least one lost element to golf.

"The hardest part was adjusting to the release," [Tournament winner Blake] Sattler said of the Volvik ball in an interview with *Sports Illustrated*. "It brought more strategy into the game."

In another reaction to major changes in the game, Nicklaus' Memorial Tournament at Muirfield Village Golf Club introduced special furrowing rakes for bunkers. Nicklaus' reason behind the controversial concept? Bunkers are too easy, he said.

"Bunkers are really supposed to be a penalty," he said in a press conference before the event. "[Tour officials] have been telling the guys all year that the honeymoon is over and the bunkers are going to be a penalty. I said, 'We can start it right here if you want to.' And they said, 'Fine.'"

Naturally, the players complained.

Australian Geoff Ogilvy won the U.S. Open at Winged Foot despite not caring for the USGA's ultra-narrow course setup or its "tiered rough" concept, which was greeted with mostly positive reviews. He's already proved to be an eloquent spokesman for a return to sensible golfing values.

"Two important aspects of golf have gone in completely the wrong direction," he told Golfobserver.com. "Most things are fine. Greens are generally better, for example. But the whole point of golf has been lost. Ben Hogan said it best. His thing was that you don't measure a good drive by how far it goes; you analyze its quality by its position relative to the next target. That doesn't exist in golf anymore."

Highlighted by Phil Mickelson's final-hole double bogey that started with an errant tee shot that hit a corporate tent, TV ratings for Saturday were the lowest since measuring began in 1982 and were down 12 percent on Sunday, making it the second-worst watched U.S. Open ever.

Then burned-out Hoylake hosted the British Open. Tiger Woods won despite only hitting one driver over four rounds on the fast and fiery turf.

And even though Hoylake was entirely brown but for a few areas on the putting surfaces, players loved it.

"I'd like to see more of these in the States, I really would. It's so much fun to play," Chris DiMarco told the press after the tournament.

After Tiger captured the PGA Championship at soft but well-conditioned Medinah, the U.S. team took another beating in the Ryder Cup contested at Ireland's K Club, falling by the same nine-point margin as last time and causing many to wonder why American players are so inferior on a match-play stage.

The game lost legends Byron Nelson, Patty Berg and Herbert Warren Wind, while the PGA Tour killed the oldest professional tournament, the Western Open.

And in the fall, Bandon Dunes creator Mike Keiser announced that the fourth course at the Oregon resort would be named Old MacDonald, and it will

feature a team-driven design process led by Pacific Dunes architect Tom Doak and his design partner Jim Urbina.

"I think I'm not employing Doak and Urbina as architects," Keiser said. "I'm employing them to design as C.B. MacDonald and Seth Raynor, his apprentice and successor, would build it if they were alive today." ■

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