

**A**t the United States Golf Association's (USGA) annual meeting, Equipment Committee Chair Jim Vernon explained what the USGA has been doing to study the impact of significant changes in the game.

The speech ([www.usga.org/news/2006/february/es.html](http://www.usga.org/news/2006/february/es.html)) was significant because it marked a rare moment of forthright communication from an organization that has become more secretive than Dick Cheney's Energy Task Force.

For those who feel golf is in decline in part because longer, narrower courses combined with expensive commercialization are driving people away, the USGA is laying the groundwork to do something about it.

The most interesting component of the talk was Vernon's reference to the "de-skilling" of golf.

"In short, we are to remain vigilant to ensure that improvements in technology do not diminish the skill necessary to play the game."

And there were tough statements like, "We know that the way the way the game is being played by accomplished players has changed dramatically in recent years."

And most blunt of all, "We know from the ShotLink data provided by the PGA Tour that driving accuracy has ceased to be a factor in predicting success on the PGA Tour."

Vernon reiterated that "increased distance has other negative ramifications that we seek to avoid — the lengthening and toughening of courses in response to increases in distance is costly and in many cases impossible. It also has negative effects on environmental and ecological issues, on the costs of maintaining courses and on the pace of play as well."

Everyone in the golf course industry knows about the last statement, and many might throw in safety issues brought on by the distance rush. But the more complicated question, and the one that the USGA has chosen to focus on, is this notion of skill. "What I am suggesting is that we need to re-frame the discussion of how the game is being changed," Vernon said.

What is skill in golf, and why does it matter?

There isn't enough space here to tackle this complicated but important question. For now,

## Re-Establishing the Virtues of Skill

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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consider how many skills are less necessary because of equipment advances in the past five years or so.

- The spin rate of golf balls has changed so that good players don't worry as much (or at all) about wind.

- The ability for top players to power their way through a 450-yard hole lined with rough has eliminated the reward of precision. (And yet fairways keep getting narrower.)

- The ability to carry the ball longer and higher than ever has meant a farewell to the ground game along with its wide array of delicious shotmaking and strategic possibilities.

Many will argue the equipment has allowed average golfers to enjoy the game more. While there is no question that more forgiving clubs make things easier, the inability to shape the ball, the reduction of shotmaking options, the changing nature of courses adapting to the equipment and other assorted skill-related shots have made the game less complete.

The Wall Street-driven race to keep up with the latest gear has made it more expensive for some, and an easy pastime to pass up for millions more.

There is an entire generation of younger players who have no concept what real skill used to mean — I'm talking about skill that was necessary as recently as 10 years ago.

So as 19th-hole discussions rage on this summer about the looming equipment battle, remember the skill question.

Many golfers believe that skill means hitting down an imaginary center line, striking the ball as high and long as possible while avoiding land mines along the way. But anyone who played golf prior to the recent equipment boom knows there is so much more to skill than that.

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