

The United States Golf Association (USGA) is so unwilling to address the distance issue in a meaningful way that its officials are now ignoring their own past statements.

Some have been holding out hope that the USGA — the USGA that issued the May 2002 Joint Statement of Principles with the Royal & Ancient Golf Club — would step up to the plate and defend the best interests of the game.

That USGA believed that any further significant increases in hitting distances at the highest level are undesirable. Whether these increases in distance emanate from advancing equipment technology, greater athleticism of players, improved player coaching, golf course conditioning or a combination of these or other factors, they will have the impact of seriously reducing the challenge of the game. The consequential lengthening or toughening of courses would be costly or impossible and have a negative effect on important environmental issues. Pace of play would slow, and playing costs would increase.

In a September *ESPN.com* chat, USGA President Walter Driver logged on to answer questions about, of all things, the Ryder Cup. All he received, though, were questions about the distance issue with a few softballs mixed in (“Is Tiger the best golfer you’ve ever seen?”).

Asked when the USGA would act on the distance issue now that the PGA Tour driving distance average has increased 10 yards since the above statement was adopted, Driver wheeled out this barrow of bologna.

“The facts are the tour distances are nearly flat the last three years,” he said. “They went down somewhat a few years ago and then leveled off. So the facts show there hasn’t been much increase to show us that we need to act from when we made those statements.”

Just so there’s no gray area here, consider the PGA Tour Driving Distance average, the primary number the USGA uses to gauge increases or decreases:

2001 average: 279.4 yards
2002 average: 279.8 yards
2003 average: 286.3 yards
2004 average: 287.3 yards

The USGA Keeps Its ‘Distance’

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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2005 average: 288.9 yards

2006 average: 289.6 yards (as of Sept. 10)

Driver is correct in saying the distances are “nearly flat” the last three years. But the Statement of Principles was issued in 2002 — four years ago. Either the 2001 or 2002 averages would be the line-in-the-sand number, which shows an unprecedented 10-yard leap. That certainly qualifies as significant, unless you’re the USGA president looking for a way to weasel out of a well-publicized declaration you helped author.

Driver’s remark that PGA Tour distances “went down somewhat a few years ago” is, of course, not true. And his line stating “the facts show there hasn’t been much increase to show us that we need to act” is confirmation the USGA will go back on its word. Since the USGA is abdicating responsibility, it’s time for a grassroots movement to deal with this problem.

In August, the Ohio Golf Association played its Champions tournament with a higher-spinning ball that restored shotmaking and put less premium on distance. While the ball may not be the perfect solution because it discriminated against naturally long hitters, it did restore some sanity by placing emphasis on skill and thought.

A line in the sand was drawn.

If golfers want to experiment with the ball, the PROsPECT, they can go to www.volvik.com for more information. And don’t hesitate to have your golf professional tell sales reps from the major manufacturers that your course would like to buy the rolled-back balls that were submitted for the USGA’s phantom ball study.

The USGA just isn’t willing to act on the game’s behalf — or even stick to its own (statement of) principles.

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