

SOFTSPIKES

Yuks and Grins

By Rod Johnson
The Grass Roots

It hardly seems possible that two years have passed since I first met you. It was love at first sight. My life was to be changed forever. To be honest, I had heard of you and had even seen a picture of you in magazines. How could something so different from tradition, so plastic, catch my conservative eye begging for more Oh, "Softspikes."

The greatest thing to happen to the game of golf since surlyn. The elimination of the SPIKEMARK.

Spikemarks have been part of golf since at least 1914 when Walter Hagen wore a pair of "hob-nailed" shoes on his way to winning the 1914 U.S. Open. I guess the imitation of professional golfers by wannabes was as common then as it is now. Shoe cobblers were probably overrun with a rash of orders unequalled until Michael Jordan and "just do it" came along.

Golf and golf courses have changed a lot since 1914, but here we are 80-plus years later still walking around with nails in our shoes. Spiked shoes are part of the great tradition of golf. Aren't they as much a part of the uniform as neckties, knickers and plaid polyester slacks? Are they just another fad like metal woods and lob wedges?

I'll never forget my first pair of golf spikes — a pair of well-used hushpuppies purchased for a buck and a half from my buddy Jake. I had arrived as a "player!" No longer was I just another kid pedaling his bike, Kryodens in tow, to the local links to slap around U.S. Tigers. I had spikes and each grinding step across the asphalt parking lot provided proof. My score that day, in the mid-60s, for nine holes was the same as B.S. (before spikes). I didn't really care. I had arrived on the golf scene and had the blisters to show for it.

Two years have flown by since the January 1994 issue of *Golf Course Management* and that first advertisement for *Softspikes*. A plastic replacement spike claiming to be a superior alternative to metal golf spikes. The claims. . . "Finally a product that lowers scores and maintenance costs." I had my doubts. Remember, I'd already been burned once when metal spikes provided no relief from double figures. As for lower maintenance costs, we've all heard those wild claims before.

The new era A.S.S. (after softspikes) has already provided enough yuks and grins to write a book. But who needs another trendy golf book? Besides, how would you title the book? A Good Walk Spoiled By Spiked Shoes? Or how about, And Then Arnie said to Jack. . . "Please don't step in my line"?

The term spikemark is actually a euphemism for the tearing, ripping and shredding of an otherwise flawless green surface. Jim Latham, retired USGA Green Section Agronomist, described spikemarks as "snags" of the surface runners of the tuf that have not yet rooted to the soil. By rule, the USGA continues to prohibit the repair of spike marks before putting. This is despite the well-known fact that spikemarks are the cause of 99% of missed putts. Metal spikes also leave their marks on tee and fairway areas but to date there have been no reports of their actually causing any golfer to lose a match.

It would only seem natural that an alternative which would eliminate spike marks from the earth, or more importantly from golf greens, would enjoy immediate and unanimous use. Not so. Golf is a game of hard dying traditions.

An alternative to metal spikes and the inherent damage is not a new concept. The early eighties saw the introduction of golf shoes with "nubbies." It was a bad name for a bad that did more damage to green surfaces than metal. Perhaps there lies the roots of caution and cynicism.

Softspikes were actually developed as a gentler alternative to metal spikes for wacky winter golfers wishing to play on frozen greens in a state better known for potatoes than for golf. To date Idaho's biggest contribution to golf had been an island green that could be maneuvered into different positions by a series of underwater cables.

Softspikes, the company, has in a relatively short period of time seen ownership changes and product upgrades. The company is presently owned by Wisconsin's very own Rob O'Loughlin. The story goes that Mr. O'Loughlin, after playing golf at Muirfield Village, Jack's place in Ohio, a course that has banned metal spikes, was so impressed by the quality of spikefree greens that he set out to buy a few sets of replacement spikes to give to golfing friends. A call to *Softspike* later and he owned the company.

I've had some amusing and some confusing phone conversations with the *Softspike* people but I must admit the subject of buying the company is one thing that never came up. I am amused though that the *Softspike* people are never at a loss for an answer. Who's banning metal? "Why just about everyone, listen to this impressive list. Not one club that has banned metal has ever gone back to allowing metal." Any lawsuits? "None that we know of." What about the

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negative University research that's recently surfaced? "Flawed. In one study it wasn't even our spike. In another case we're getting bad ink from someone who requested funds for a study and we turned him down."

A *Softspike* beef. A phone call to *Softspike* can be an adventure. Blame it on growing pains. I have three different toll free numbers in two different cities, Indianapolis and Rockville, MD, to call to place orders. The list of scratched-off names on the business card in my file reads Dan, David, Tim and John. The *Softspike* people must be just as confused with me. How else could you explain that my best buddy on the phone, who seems to know that "I'm the man," would turn around and call the locker room guy and sell him 5,000 spikes that we just didn't need going into winter.

It's a shame that golf's touring professionals don't share in the enthusiasm. All of golf follows their lead. If, one Sunday, tour players showed up wearing red hats, come Monday the red hats would be flying off golf shop racks.

Touring pros continue to resist, refusing to use softspikes. While readily admitting to have never tried them, pros competing in this past year's Greater Milwaukee Open were adamant against their use on the tour. According to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, tour regular Jim Gallagher, Jr. doesn't think you'll ever see them on tour. Gallagher was quoted as saying "I've never tried them. I think they need to do a little more technology on them." Gallagher claims tour players have swings that require more traction. Gallagher did agree with a ban on metal spikes for the amateurs during Wednesday Pro-Ams to ensure smoother greens for tournament play.

The prevailing attitude toward softspikes on the PGA Tour is probably best exemplified by Tom Watson, the 1992 recipient of GCSAA's Old Tom Morris Award (This award was given before the previously mentioned A.S.S. era). Mr. Watson recently told a reporter of softspikes, "I think they're dangerous and people shouldn't wear them." One would think that "Yippee Tom" with all of his putting problems would welcome any help he could get on those short ones.

Two-time U.S. Open winner Andy North wears softspikes but that is discredited in that he is friends with Rob O'Loughlin, the previously mentioned owner of the company. Ed Terasa, unquestionably the best player among Wisconsin Club Pros, won the 1995 Wisconsin State Open wearing them.

Most golf is not played as part of a PGA Tour Event. Clubs around the country have recognized the benefits and have taken to banning metal. As mentioned, a most impressive list is just a phone call away. Just be sure to hang up before you own the company! The list of Wisconsin clubs banning metal is equally as impressive. It includes Green Bay C.C., The Bog and Bishops Bay. Count Blackwolf Run and Sentry World into the group for 1996.

Many clubs have taken a wait and see attitude, strongly endorsing the voluntary use of softspikes. Numerous courses have already tried, or have scheduled for 1996, spike-

less events or weekends. I personally did a spikeless 260 player member/guest last summer. The results were outstanding with only one player asking for his metal spikes back. Opponents became proponents.

Gene Haas, executive director of the Wisconsin Golf Association, sees golfers as having a pair of both spiked and spikeless shoes in their arsenal. Haas said, "Absolutely without a doubt green surfaces are better without metal spikes." He questioned the present technology, citing his recent attendance at a conference of golf administrators where other exciting alternatives entering the market were shown.

Last year's State Amateur Championship held at Milwaukee Country Club, a course which has banned metal spikes, was competed with metal spikes allowed. This was after discussions between the WSGA and the Milwaukee C.C. Board of Directors concluded that the State Amateur was essentially a closed tournament and it was heretofore a WSGA decision. WSGA wisely declined the banning of metal spikes and at any of their future events the banning of metal spikes will be dictated by the host club.

Where does GCSAA stand on softspikes? Switzerland. Politically correct and neutral. GCSAA, plain and simple, does not endorse products or their use.

The 1996 GCSAA Golf Championship, presented in partnership with The Toro Company, is offering a sensational tee prize package that includes a pair of Foot-Joys. The golf shoes will be equipped with the standard metal spikes. According to GCSAA staff member, Pam Owens, alternative spikes will be made available, free of charge, and assistance will be given by GCSAA staff. GCSAA Director and Tournament Vice Chairman Tommy Witt said, "It is the logical thing to have softspikes available."

GCSAA President Gary Grigg gave me a turf lesson when I discussed softspikes with him. "Spike marks are a bentgrass issue; Bermuda greens don't spike up," according to Grigg. Witt agreed with Grigg, adding "Bermuda grass is not as low cut and is not as succulent."

Where are we headed? Golfers are an odd bunch, willing to lay down \$300 plus for the latest in golf club technology, a super kryptonite graphite bubble-shafted driver that might improve driving distance by 3 or 4 yards on the 12 holes per round one might use a driver. They cringe at the thought of replacing their beloved metal spikes when there is no doubt they improve green surfaces, where 75% of the game is played. It's not a cost issue. Propose purchasing a brand new piece of maintenance equipment that will eliminate spike marks and see how fast you get approval.

Metal spikes are doomed to be part of golf's history. Clear a spot for them in Far Hills, New Jersey.

Softspikes will be pressured by a competitive market to continue to improve its product and the way it does business. They do have a leg-up in that their product has a name product identity not unlike a bandage is a "Bandaide" and a disposable tissue is a "Kleenex."

There will be numerous others to enter the market and shoe companies will develop green user friendly shoe styles. Any way you look at it, golf greens will be better for it!