

A Position Paper on the Impact of Golf Equipment on the Game of Golf

By American Society of Golf Course Architects

The balance between preserving golf's integrity and encouraging a free market in the manufacture and selection of golf equipment has been an on-going battle throughout the last century. Consider the following:

"There is a pretty consensus of opinion among first class players that the time has come to check the excessive length to which the golf ball can be driven. Ballmakers are vying with each other in producing balls of ever-increasing driving capacity, and as most of the best courses have now been stretched to their utmost limits, it is obvious that holes and courses are speedily being ruined as tests of the game. Green committees and golf architects have been struggling for some time to maintain the normal rate of scoring by increasing the difficulties to putting, but it is clear that a point has been reached at which such devices are destroying the balance and character of the game which makes it enjoyable and worth playing."

Such word is reminiscent of many recent articles and letters found in golf publications. In reality, they originate from a petition sent to 152 of Britain's top amateurs in 1912! 141 replied, agreeing that the Amateur Championship in Britain should be played with standardized golf balls,

Great Courses Now Defenseless

Today, with 300 yard drives commonplace; the great layouts of the past are (once again) being rendered defenseless. Hazards placed at strategic distances are obsolete and extra room no longer exists to add additional tees. The strategic principles that guided the design of all the great layouts in the 20's and 30's can no longer keep up with the state of today's game. Unfortunately, the onus of adjusting to technology is still falling on the golf courses.

To protect the hallmark designs of its forbearers, the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA) endorses a modification to the ball that results in a percentage decrease on its flight/distance. Such a solution would have the greatest effect on the longer hitter, while having a lesser effect on the high handicappers who support the game and find it challenging enough. Distance is its own reward, no matter the relative scale it is measured on.

Golf Ball Has Been Modified

In fact, the golf ball has been consistently modified in response to technological advances. With the introduction of the Haskell ball in 1898, the debate began over how to adjust ball specifications to preserve the game's traditions. The USGA, at various times, has specified a 1.62-inch, 1.62-ounce ball; a 1.7-inch ball with no weight restriction and a 1.68-inch, 1.55-ounce ball. In 1932, there was a consensus

agreement on a 1.68-inch, 1.62-ounce ball, which is still the standard. In Great Britain, the smaller ball remained legal until it was banned at the Open Championship in 1974 and eliminated outright in 1990.

Donald Ross, a charter member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA), voiced his own opinion about the process in a 1923 letter to James Tufts of Pinehurst, NC.

"My personal view is that the standard ball should be a floater. I do not believe it is possible in any other way to control the manufacturers from continuing to make a ball which will fly as far as the present one. A floater will control the distance absolutely on the long hitter, would not take a yard from the distance of the average players who really are the supporters of golf, and the average man would find it a much easier ball to pick up through the fairway. It would be more durable, reducing the cost of the game to some extent. In fact, altogether, I think it would be very desirable change."

Ross' letter foresaw today's controversy and legitimizes the role of the golf course architect in the debate. The Society is not only dedicated to defending the great layouts of the past, but protecting today's hallmark designs from suffering the same fate in 70 years. No other organization is better situated to be an advocate for the golf course. Tournament consideration has market value for existing facilities. As players continue to hit the ball farther, courses will no longer be able to host events and therefore suffer a decline in prestige that can be measured in real dollars.

While maintaining free enterprise among manufacturers in the design and production of golf equipment is a tradition of the game, the control over the parameters in which that production takes place must be absolute. The fate of golf's value and integrity is inherent in that control.

A recent USGA test showed that a golf swing clocked at 109 mph, which is average for touring pros, produces a drive of 289 yards with a persimmon club. The highest theoretical COR .880 or .890 club hit the ball 309 yards, a 20-yard increase. It's evident that longer distance, plus improved accuracy, can put many golf courses in a defenseless position. And the situation could worsen each year.

Golf is played differently today than ever before, with developing effects that are eroding the game's traditions. Inaction today is complicity in the deterioration of the game tomorrow. We urge the United States Golf Association and Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews to take the necessary steps to preserve the great golf courses of the world.

(Editor's Note: This article was prepared by Bobby Weed, Member ASGCA Board of Governors.)