

SPECIAL REPORT: Equipment

PGA Professionals offer continuing discussion

By Mark S. Murphy

Golf is not the game it once was. Gone are hickory shafts, floater balls, sheep mowing fairways, featheries, stymies, guttys and Walter Hagen toting around enough clubs to outfit his competitor as well as himself. Today in their place are high-modulus graphite shafts, titanium-headed drivers and multi-core, urethane-cover balls.

PGA President Roger Warren knows all too well about the changing nature of equipment and the responsibilities of PGA Professionals to grow the game with this advanced technology.

“Promoting interest and participation in the game is part of the 90-year-old mission of The PGA,” says Warren. “Improved fitting and instruction leading to better shotmaking and more enjoyment sounds like a pretty good formula for meeting that mission.”

Bob Ford, who as the PGA head professional at Oakmont (Pa.) Country Club has hosted two U.S. Opens and is preparing for his third in 2007, has seen what technology has done for the best players in the world and what it is doing to the best courses in the world. But in his position at Oakmont, as well as at Seminole Golf Club in Florida, where he is also the PGA head professional during the winter months, Ford listens to his members talk about equipment, and what they think defines the discussion that has taken place in the golf world over the last decade.

“The avid player says, ‘I hate what is going on on the Tour and how far they are hitting it,’” says Ford. “They think the USGA should do something. But in the same breath they say, ‘Don’t do anything to me.’” And the reason why they don’t want anyone fooling



their perspectives on the about equipment regulation

with their clubs and balls is simple, says Ford.

“I think they derive more enjoyment from the game,” he says, recounting how 50-, 60- and 70-year-olds are hitting the ball as far as they ever did.

“Everybody is in the constant search for the new piece of equipment that will help their games, including me.”

Ford is by no means alone in his assessment. Discussions with numerous PGA members confirm that many see advances in equipment as good for the game.

Bill Eschenbrenner, the 2005 PGA Golf Professional of the Year and PGA Master Professional at the Lone Star Golf Club in El Paso, Texas, enjoys the fruits of modern technology. He sees the average player having more fun because he

can hit the ball farther, and just as importantly, straighter. Plus, “I’m 67 and hitting the ball past where I used to hit it,” he says. “That’s pretty good.”

While there are many who share Ford’s and Eschenbrenner’s opinions, there is no consensus in the golf world. Traditionalists, which include the U.S. Golf Association (USGA), as well as many members of the PGA Tour, golf course architects and some PGA Professionals, acknowledge that technology is changing the game, and not for the better. There is a feeling that many aspects of what makes golf appealing will be lost to the sands of time (if they are not already) if something isn’t done to restore the balance of art and science that is at the core of the game. And they are calling for more stringent regulation of the game’s equipment.

Hit it anywhere, just hit it long

An examination of the correlation between four key PGA Tour statistical categories and rank on the money list reveals that driving accuracy is not as

important to how much money a player earns, while driving distance, greens in regulation and putting average are all within historical ranges (a correlation of 1

indicates a direct cause-and-effect relationship, while a correlation of 0 means that the two measures being compared are not related to one another).



Source: USGA

Still True to Its Roots

“Tinkering with golf equipment has always been part of the game,” wrote Gary Galyean in an article late last year. Buried in that seemingly innocuous statement by the member of the USGA Communications Committee is one monumental assumption after another.

First, there always have been advances made in the game, and there always will be. Second, it is the nature of human beings to try and improve themselves – to progress – beyond their past. And, third, to try and stop that would be folly.

Despite the technology-driven advances, however, golf is still true to its 16th century roots. It is a game with a stern embrace, Calvinist, one might say. It tests us always. Whether played for the score or the joy of a well-struck shot, golf gives simple feedback – either you have accomplished what you set out to or

you haven’t. There is no middle ground. Each shot is its own little morality play, and you are either found worthy or wanting.

In the end, it may be the tension created by the modern and the ancient that is most appealing about golf. But it often leaves the game struggling to strike a delicate balance, a conflict that on a regular basis boils to the surface and takes on a life of its own.

That the USGA felt compelled to have Galyean spend 15 pages talking about equipment and regulation in its October *Inside the USGA* newsletter is a sign that this is one such time. Occasionally the discussion is at such a fevered pitch it seems to be tearing the game apart. On the one side are the technophiles, on the other the traditionalists, and both have made their voices heard.

Wayne DeFrancesco is the 2001 PGA Club Professional Champion who teaches at Woodholme Country Club in Baltimore, Md. “Technology has made the game more exciting for the best players,” he says, “and definitely made it more playable for those who struggle.... I think (golf’s governing bodies) have done a good job of regulating equipment to this point, and we don’t need any new restrictions.”

Adds Brent Krause, PGA Master Professional and general manager/ director of golf at Wynlakes Golf & Country Club in Montgomery, Ala.: “I submit that if someone enjoys the game because of some technological medium, then it is good for the game. He or she will play more; take more lessons; buy more hot dogs and cold beer; hit more practice balls; join more clubs; rent more carts; and just maybe purchase more ‘high-tech’ equipment to feed the addiction.”

While DeFrancesco and Krause work with the everyday golfer, a loud voice in the discussion comes from the elite players in the game. Tiger Woods, for all his distance off the tee, is very much a traditionalist when it comes to equipment. It was only in 2005 that he finally allowed himself to be fully “optimized” off the tee and regained his dominant position in driving distance on the PGA Tour.

“I have faith in the governing bodies. They are not trying to stymie progress or over-regulate the game. They are merely trying to make sure everybody plays by the same Rules.”

**—Mike Small,
2005 PGA Club
Professional
Champion**



“The game has changed since I’ve been on Tour,” Woods said in a recent interview with *Golf Digest*. “At the moment, equipment has brought everyone closer together. . . . I’d like to see more spin added to the golf ball, so misses would be more pronounced and good shots more rewarded.”

Bob Sowards recently received his third consecutive PGA Club Professional Player of the Year award. The PGA teaching professional from Wedgewood Golf & Country Club in Powell, Ohio, believes that most of the benefit of advancing technology has accrued to the better player, especially in the performance of the golf ball.

“It doesn’t go off line as much,” as the older, balata-covered balls, he says, echoing Woods. With less fear that an imperfect swing will cause the ball to fly into the woods, better players are swinging harder and hitting their drives farther and straighter, with the result that scores are improving. Sowards agrees with Jack Nicklaus that Tour players should be playing a golf ball that does not fly as far or stay on line as much as what is available to the average player.

And so the discussion about equipment improvements and how to regulate them goes on.

Multiple Equipment Regulations

Over the past eight years, the USGA’s regulation of equipment has included the 1998 limit on the coefficient of restitution (COR) of a clubface. Then came 2004’s limit on the size of the clubhead (460cc, plus a 10cc tolerance) and a limit to a club’s total length. Then came a clarification of the regulation on clubhead dimensions, as well as one on COR (to extend the limits to all clubs, not just those designated as driving clubs). And now the USGA has put out a proposal to regulate the moment of inertia (MOI) of clubheads. Last year, the USGA requested that golf ball manufacturers submit for study prototype golf balls that fly 15 and 25 yards less than the current overall distance standard (ODS).

But while Sowards and Woods are talking about



USGA addresses equipment issue

The October 2005 issue of the U.S. Golf Association’s *Inside the USGA* newsletter devoted 15 pages to “Special Issue: Equipment.” Written by USGA Communications Committee member Gary Galyean, this lengthy

story was titled “Keeping Our Eye on the Ball, USGA continues to monitor the game’s equipment.”

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the game as it is played at the highest levels, the USGA says it takes action in the interest of the average golfer as well. “The most significant factor in the appeal of golf is the challenge – whenever you play, you have 70 to 100 chances to (pull off) the shot you plan,” says Dick Rugge, the USGA’s chief technical director. “People talk about that great shot, the 30-footer they rolled in. It’s the thrill of that one shot. It’s the opportunity to overcome that challenge.”

Rugge is fond of citing the examples of bowling and tennis, which experienced drastic drop-offs in popularity following technological changes that made the games easier for the average participant.

“The Rules need to be administered to make sure that (golf’s) challenge is maintained,” he says. “Golf has been pretty steady for 500 years. Not too many things are in that category.”

As commissioner of the PGA Tour, Tim Finchem is a witness to the best golf in the world. And he knows the effects that improved equipment has had on the game at the elite level. He is quick to praise the work of the USGA and the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews and has in the past made it clear

Average Handicap Index Since 1993

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Men	16.3	16.5	16.2	16.3	15.9	16.0	N/A	15.7	15.6	15.5	15.3	15.2	15.0
Women	29.9	29.9	29.4	29.4	29.1	28.9	N/A	28.5	28.5	28.2	28.1	27.9	28.0

Source: USGA



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that the ruling bodies are in charge when it comes to rules and regulations. But he knows firsthand, from members of the Tour like Woods, as well as elder statesmen like Nicklaus and Finchem's predecessor, Deane Beman, that the conflict over the changing nature of the game at the elite level is real and there is a sense of urgency for change among many factions.

"We are encouraging the USGA to create options for us to put in place for the future," says Finchem, "if we think change is necessary."

But he added, regulation changes must be undertaken prudently and done in a way that will not affect the playing public's enthusiasm for the game.

Mike Small, the defending PGA Club Professional Champion and men's golf coach at the University of Illinois, is a supporter of the USGA's role and its regulation decisions.

"I have faith in the governing bodies," he says. "They are not trying to stymie progress or over-regulate the game. They are merely trying to make sure everyone plays by the same Rules."

But strong arguments are being made elsewhere. Wally Uihlein is the chairman and chief executive officer of The Acushnet Co., which as parent of Titleist, FootJoy and Cobra is the largest golf equipment manufacturer in the world. He responds simply: "Where's the harm? There is no evidence professional, competitive amateur or recreational golf is experiencing irreparable harm as a result of advances in equipment."

Benoit Vincent, the chief technical officer for TaylorMade-adidas Golf, which makes the most-used driver on the PGA Tour, believes the equipment advances actually enhance the excitement of the game. "Guess what, the people who design golf courses are trying to create excitement by designing new courses. Teachers are using new methods to teach. All of us are trying to make the game more enjoyable."

So the discussion seems to have reached a point... where exactly? Only by answering this question can the game begin to step away from conflict within itself and focus more on addressing the challenges it faces today.

That's where PGA Professionals come in. More than anyone, PGA Professionals see firsthand the impact that equipment advances have on the vast majority of golfers. They hear what their members and customers are saying. They play the game and have experienced the changes themselves.

And while they manage courses and sell equipment, their prime directive is to make the experience of playing golf as enjoyable as possible. Sowards, for example, gives between 700 and 900 lessons a year.

"It's all about making the (club) member happy,"

he says. "If we can give him a driver that hits it farther, I support that."

More Forgiving Equipment

Because of technological advances, golf equipment has never been more forgiving. And according to a proprietary study done by the National Golf Foundation (NGF) for Nike Golf last year, 59 percent of golfers, 59 percent of PGA Tour and LPGA members, and 68 percent of retailers surveyed think that is a good thing.

"The advances of equipment over the last 20 years have been fueled by record spending in research and development," says PGA President Warren. "The average golfer likes the focus on clubfitting, the way these new products perform and how they increase their enjoyment of the game."

Conversations with PGA Professionals seem to confirm the NGF's findings and Warren's feelings.

Ken Morton Sr., who has been a member of The PGA of America since 1966, is all for change. He is the PGA director of golf for the Haggin Oaks Golf Complex in Sacramento, Calif., as well as the chief executive officer of Morton Golf, a family business that operates 90 holes at three facilities for the city, where rounds played were up 3 percent last year over 2004.

THE FALLOFF

A 2003 report by the National Golf Foundation (NGF) asked golfers considered "best customers" – those who play 25 or more rounds per year and/or spend \$1,000 on golf-related spending per year – why they played less golf in 2002. Their unaided responses indicated that equipment played a minor role in their decision to cut back on golf.

	All golfers
Not enough time due to work	71%
Not enough time due to family	40%
Golf fees too expensive	30%
Courses too crowded/hard to get tee time	22%
Weather	21%
Don't have enough people to play with	16%
Don't play well enough	14%
Takes too much time to play	8%
Equipment too expensive	6%
Physical problems	3%
Does not provide enough exercise	1%

Source: NGF

"Changes have benefited the average golfer even more than the tour professional," says the 1998 PGA Golf Professional of the Year. "And I think that is a wonderful thing." Morton believes the equipment discussion has pretty much ignored the average player.

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PGA Professionals say technology is an integral part of golf's tradition

The evolution of equipment and the impact of technology on a traditional game have spawned discussion, debate and delirium among golfers for decades. Have metal-titanium woods, graphite shafts, three-piece and soft-cover golf balls, 460cc drivers, perimeter-weighted cavity-back irons, and launch monitors that do everything but mix a martini revolutionized golf or diluted the game?

While whispers increase of the United States Golf Association (USGA) and Royal & Ancient Golf Club (R&A) possibly rolling back the contemporary golf ball and tightening restrictions on golf-equipment performance characteristics, there stands a uniquely qualified expert on the issue whose voice must be heard.

The PGA Professional.

From the standpoint of being a professional teacher, player, merchandiser, marketer, manager, rules enforcer, tournament coordinator and 1,001 additional golf-related jobs, who is more eminently qualified to capture, judge and analyze the impact of technology on golf than the 28,000-plus PGA members dedicated to growing the game and preserving its traditions?



Michael Clinton, PGA

seen firsthand the evolution – and revolution – of golf equipment during the past 25 years. The majority clearly believe technology has helped the typical golfer play better, has enhanced enjoyment of the game, and has played an instrumental role in retaining golfers new to the game. But some PGA members are also concerned that technology, if left unchecked and unregulated, could threaten the long-term integrity of the game.

“As PGA Professionals, we should be concerned about the overall integrity of the game, and currently that means we need to monitor and, if needed, voice our opinions about limiting the distance created by new technology,” observes PGA Professional Michael T. Clinton, senior vice president and founder of GolfTEC Enterprises of Greenwood

Who is better qualified to quantify the impact of today's equipment than the men and women who work the front lines of lesson tees, practice tees and first tees 365 days a year at golf facilities throughout North America?

Simply stated, PGA Professionals have

Village, Colo., who worries that the combination of today's 460cc drivers and “hot” golf balls could render some classic courses obsolete for major-championship competition.

While Clinton cautions that technology could go too far, most PGA members consider technology the driving force behind improvement and overall enjoyment of the game for the 24 million golfers who play 10 or more rounds per year. They also see technology as the main magnet that attracts new players to the game, many perhaps dreaming of matching that 350-yard Tiger Woods or John Daly drive they see on television.

“Technology is a godsend, a prayer that has been answered for golf professionals and for players of all abilities,” insists Rick Danruther, PGA Professional at Sierra Lakes Golf Club in Fontana, Calif., and the 2005 PGA Merchandiser of the Year for public courses in the Southern California Section.

“Technology has been wonderful for the game, and certainly is responsible for increasing the number of new golfers and the number of golfers who continue playing the game because it is more enjoyable. Technology has made it easier to teach the game, because today almost everyone can hit a good

“I think the PGA Professional's major role is to grow the game by creating and serving the traditions and values of the game,” says Morton. “If that is through new equipment that allows for longer drives or makes it easier to get out of sand, that helps us grow the game.”

Five miles from Ford's Oakmont home lies The Longue Vue Club, sitting on a bluff overlooking the Allegheny River north of Pittsburgh. It does not have major championship aspirations, but its players are every bit as excited about hitting the ball straight and far.

Ken Pizzica is the PGA head professional at Longue Vue and he has been a PGA Professional since 1968. “They can't wait until we have demo day,” says Pizzica about his members. “They read about it all winter, and they can't wait to get out there and hit it farther.

“People feel the new technology lets them hit it farther and straighter regardless of how well they hit it. And I don't know anyone who has gone back to playing persimmon woods just because they used to play them in the past. Everyone plays golf to try and improve and enjoy it more. Even though they aren't playing much better, they seem to be

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**—PGA
President
Roger Warren**



shot when fitted with the proper equipment. That's one of the biggest breakthroughs. Today, we can match the right clubs to virtually every player and the technology can help everyone play pretty well with a little instruction. Basically, technology has made the game far more enjoyable for the masses. Like any other business, manufacturers are always trying to build a better product, and they will always discover new ways to help the average player play better golf. As long as they do it within the prescribed equipment limits and regulations, there is nothing wrong with that."

Says Price Courter, a PGA member for 25 years who has spent the past 20 at Hogan Park Golf Course in Midland, Texas: "New technology has had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the game, and it has certainly enhanced the enjoyment for the average golfer. It's perfectly natural for manufacturers to constantly try to build better equipment to help golfers play better. You look at tennis and what a difference the graphite racquet (and livelier strings) made when it replaced the old wooden racquet." The same has held true in golf with better equipment.

"Technology has been a fountain of youth for many players," says Courter. "I have golfers who are 50 or 60 years old

tell me they can hit it as far, or farther, than they could 25 years ago. Technology has kept them active in the game. If you want to see the positive impact technology has made, look at the faces of golfers at a Demo Day when they are trying new equipment for the first time in many years. We'll have 300 or 400 people show up at Demo Day, and some of the older players can't believe it when they hit one of these new 460cc drivers. They can't believe how far technology has come in the past few years."

Some fear the combination of new, hotter drivers and livelier golf balls are threatening to make many classic golf courses obsolete. Joe Hodge, PGA Professional at Lone Palms Golf Club in Lakeland, Fla., for 16 years, isn't buying the "obsolete" argument.

"Today's high-tech equipment isn't making any courses obsolete for the average player," emphasizes Hodge. "Maybe technology has made some courses too short for Tiger (Woods) and players on the PGA Tour, but technology has only helped most players gain more gratification from playing the game. The philosophy of lengthening golf courses in response to technology is moving in the wrong direction. If you lengthen a course because everyone is supposedly *continued on page 38*

enjoying it more."

And like Ford, Pizzica uses himself as a yardstick. "When I was 18, I could drive the 7th hole, a par 4, 300 yards. I am 60 now, and I can still drive the green," he says with pride.

Finchem recognizes the unique position that PGA Professionals like Pizzica finds himself in. "He is kind of betwixt and between," says Finchem, with his ear to the ground like no one else. And yet, in his role of servicing his members and customers, he finds himself in "a close relationship with the equipment manufacturers."

But, more importantly, adds Finchem, "they (PGA Professionals) also have this incredible network of connections with members and players at their clubs." In any discussion about equipment, regulation and the

health of the game, "they have to be a source of information," he says.

"One of the things about the way the game is organized now, we have a lot of touch points with the golfing public, and the leadership of The PGA of America has the chance to communicate with its members easily" to add to the discussion.

In research done for the 2001 GOLF 20/20 Conference, best customer golfers – players who played more than 25 rounds per year, spent more than \$1,000 on fees and equipment or both – said that "ball striking," that is, the pleasure derived from a well-struck shot, was three to five times more influential than score, course conditions, competition and exercise in terms of their enjoyment of the game.

Peter Krause is the 2005 PGA

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PGA Professionals say technology is an integral part of golf's tradition

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hitting it too far, you're just playing into the hands of Tiger and the long hitters. Look at No. 12 at Augusta National. It's still one of the greatest par 3s in the world, and it has nothing to do with the length of the hole. It's only a 7- or 8-iron. I always remind people that it takes a lot of talent to make technology do what it does for a touring professional.

"I had a couple of guys ask me why I didn't build new tees to lengthen the holes on our course," revealed Hodge. "The truth is, technology has helped everyone hit it a little longer and straighter, but no one is going to bear the expense of building new tees for only four days a year when you have an important tournament. There are other things you can do to make a golf course more challenging. What people forget is that some clubs, especially the hybrids and irons, are designed for accuracy. Length isn't the only consideration. In fact, instead of conducting a long drive contest at my tournaments, I like to have a straight drive contest. That's just as important."

PGA Professionals Tim Thelen and Barry Evans have each won the PGA Club Professional Championship and continue to play at a highly competitive

level. Each is also a highly respected teacher of the game and has seen how technology has influenced touring professionals, club professionals, recreational golfers and top-flight amateurs.

Thelen, the 2000 and 2003 PGA Club Professional Championship winner, astutely observes that technological advances in golf clubs and the ball are not the only reasons why golfers are playing better.

"While it's true the golf ball, metal woods and equipment in general have come a long way, I believe you have to look at other reasons for improved scoring and enhanced enjoyment of the game," says Thelen, PGA Professional at Bushwood

Golf Center in Houston, Texas. "First, the conditions of the golf courses today are perfect. The greens are usually a perfect 10 and the fairways are cut to a perfect height, thanks to turfgrass and maintenance technology. Second, 20 years ago, the average height of a professional golfer was about 5-foot-10. Today, they are between 6-foot-1 and 6-foot-3, and in great shape with large swing arcs. With the combination of increased height and a greater arc, the

ball has to go farther."

Thelen believes technology and the forgiveness built into new equipment coupled with hotter golf balls has taken a toll, making true shotmakers almost extinct.

"Golf in my mind has become a power game," says Thelen. "There are no more chess games – hitting a shot to a certain position in the fairway to leave

a good angle or distance to the hole. Golfers in this day and age don't know how to work a golf ball, whereas 20 years ago you learned how to work a ball left to right or right to left. Part of that is due to technology. It's difficult to work a two-piece ball, which creates very little spin. I personally feel that the major golf corporations

can't go much further with technology. The COR has been pushed to the limit and the size of the golf club is 460cc. In response, golf courses have gotten too long. Grow some rough, narrow the fairways and make people think on the golf course. That's the way to make golf courses more challenging."

Evans, who won the 2002 PGA Club Professional Championship at Valhalla Golf Club in Louisville, Ky., concurs with Thelen when it comes to lengthening



Tim Thelen, PGA

Teacher of the Year. In the summers he resides at Windsong Farm Golf Club in Independence, Minn., in the winter at Bighorn Golf Club in Palm Desert,

Calif. His equipment focus is on fitting, and he often sees the benefits right away.

"I gave a guy a lesson here," Krause says, "and he was able to take full advantage of his new driver. He hit it 15 to 20 yards farther. How can that be a negative?"

So if golfers, professionals, manufacturers and the USGA all agree that hitting good shots is what brings golfers to the course, and everyone agrees that equipment advances have made it more likely that the average golfer will hit the ball well, what is the hullabaloo about?

Performance vs. Regulation

In 2002, the USGA and the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews published a statement of principles in which they stated that "any further significant increases in hitting distances at the highest levels are undesirable."

And while PGA Tour statistics show that increases in driving distances have slowed after the big advances made in '03, the USGA and the R&A, as well as The PGA, have been making major changes at their big events as well. Last year's U.S. Open venue, Pinehurst Resort's No. 2 course, played to

"Golf is an aspirational game and (average avid golfers) will consider making a change if they feel it will improve their play. They seek the Holy Grail in hopes they will reach their next goal."

**—Wally Uihlein,
chairman and CEO,
The Acushnet Co.**



(continued)

golf courses in response to the march of technology in golf. He also believes technology has made a positive impact on golf, while making the game more playable and palpable for the masses.

"Technology has had a wonderful impact on golf, and although we see longer drives and some lower scores on the PGA Tour, what's the harm?" asserts Evans, PGA Professional at Berry Hills Country Club in Charleston, W. Va. "The mistake being made is lengthening courses to make them tougher. I think the answer is to tighten them as proven on Tour by Fred Funk in The Players Championship (last year). Funk is one of the shorter hitters on Tour, but he wasn't penalized by lengthening the TPC course. He was rewarded for his accuracy and shotmaking skills. Making a course longer just plays into the power hitters' hands. We hear of 'Tigerproofing' courses (although Tiger can win anywhere) but how does lengthening a course do that? All it does is help the Tigers of the Tour, and hurt the Fred Funks."

The role of the PGA Professional in growing the game as it pertains to technology?



Barry Evans, PGA

"As PGA members, our main responsibility is to promote and grow the game of golf," notes Evans. "The technology of today is certainly easier to hit and to learn the game with, but will it help turn a 30 handicapper into a scratch golfer? No. The one thing you don't hear much about is the word talent. It takes a tremendous amount of talent to become a great golfer and no amount of technology can do that to a person with limited talent.

That being said, technology does help us promote the game of golf by making it a little bit easier to learn. If the average golfer enjoys the game more by playing a little better through technology, that's a plus. Technology is a wonderful part of our lives, and although golf's governing bodies have done an excellent job of imposing limits thus far, it has done nothing more than promoted the game by making it more enjoyable to the average golfer."

Judging by the majority of PGA Professionals, technology is a tradition in golf. A new golf ball or a new driver each year is as traditional as the Masters at Augusta National each April.

—Roger Graves

7,214 yards, versus 7,122 yards in 1999. The 2004 PGA Championship held at Whistling Straits reached a robust 7,536 yards, the longest major championship in history.

When you consider that the second U.S. Open, played at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club, was contested on a course that totaled 4,423 yards, it is clear that courses have been changing, albeit incrementally, throughout the centuries. In fact, it is a different set of numbers that concerns the USGA more.

"Today, the best golfers with a wide range of skills win (Tour) events," says Rugge, "just like they always have." But, he notes, the four core skills necessary for success – length and accuracy off the tee, getting the ball on the green in the fewest strokes, and putting – have fallen out of

balance. While driving distance has maintained a correlation with rank on the money list averaging roughly 0.2 since 1980 (a correlation of 1 means there is a direct cause-and-effect relationship between two statistics and 0 means they are not related at all), driving accuracy started dropping in the early '90s, when it was about 0.5, and reaching 0 in 2004. In other words, there was no connection between keeping the ball in the fairway and earning money. At the same time, both greens in regulation and putting average remained in their historical range, both averaging a little more than 0.5.

"Those things used to be in a pretty good balance," says Rugge. "Today that is not the case. As drives have gotten longer, players don't worry about being in the rough."

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"I gave a guy a lesson here, and he was able to take full advantage of his new driver. He hit it 15 to 20 yards farther. How can that be a negative?"

**—Peter Krause,
PGA teaching
professional,
2005 PGA Teacher
of the Year**



Interestingly, driving accuracy started declining as a factor in overall success before the oversized metal woods became commonplace, and certainly well before the advent of the large, trampoline-faced titanium drivers that are the norm today. And this is what concerns the USGA.

"There is more to it [than how long drives are]," says Ruge. "It may be the faces of the irons. And we are looking into that."

While the aforementioned Mike Small isn't a scientist, he does have opinions informed by experience. "The evolution of the golf ball and drivers has made the most difference in the game. But they aren't threatening the traditions of the game."

Equipment has played a role in the lengthening of major championship venues, but factors such as the conditioning of today's tour players and the generally pristine courses they play, certainly factor into today's courses being stretched out.

While most of the discussion continues to involve the impact on the world's best players and the premier championship venues, some argue that making golf easier for the average player may be hurting the game as well. In 1993, the average handicap index for men was 16.3 and 29.9 for women, according to the USGA. In 2005 those numbers were 15 and 28, respectively.

Ruge believes the decline is significant and is directly related to equipment technology. And while most players and PGA Professionals believe it has made the game more enjoyable, play has not increased.

It is true that the number of men, women and children who play golf, either on a course or at a range, continues to grow – up to 39 million, a rise of 8.3 percent since 2000. But rounds played are

stagnant at levels 4 percent below their high-water mark of 518.4 million in 2000.

"There is more to growing the game than making it easier to play," Ruge says.

Questioning the USGA's Stance?

While most equipment manufacturers agree with Ruge that growing the game is a complex issue, they believe the USGA's stance on equipment regulation is not helping matters.

"I think new and improved equipment plays a very important role in keeping the avid golfer interested and excited about the game," says John Solheim, the chairman and chief executive officer of Ping. That's not a surprising sentiment from the son of legendary golf equipment pioneer Karsten Solheim, the man credited with changing the face of the golf equipment industry. But he says that view also stems from what he hears from others.

"I believe most (PGA Professionals) agree that each year their customers look forward to learning about, and playing with, new equipment. The popularity of new equipment articles and issues of the various golf publications demonstrates this fact."

George Fellows is the president and chief executive officer of Callaway Golf, recently named a Platinum Sponsor by The PGA of America. The company's design philosophy is oriented toward the average golfer.

"It's really simple," says Fellows. "People love new things. Whether they are golfers or electronics buffs or musicians or fashionistas, everybody wants the latest and greatest."

Bob Wood, the president of Nike Golf, thinks the obsession with what happens on the PGA Tour can be beside the point. "A lot of the heat of the debate has to do with the effects of technology on what you see on TV on the weekend. It skews the debate in a way that is not relevant to the average golfer. It's all emotional, anecdotal hoo-ha." And while the game may not be any healthier, he argues that the average golfer has benefited.

"It's a buyers' market. It's been great for the consumer," says Wood.

Acushnet's Uihlein concurs. "Technology, in the form of game-improvement clubs, metal woods, utility clubs and durable golf balls, has played a very important role in the game's present-day popularity and appeal and helped democratize the game," he says. "Golf is an aspirational game and (average avid golfers) will consider making a change if they feel it will improve their play. They seek the Holy Grail in hopes they will reach their next goal."

Uihlein suggests that rather than "stifle innovation," golf's leading lights need to promote education. New equipment, along with better and more instruction and greater fitness will lead to better play and, therefore, more play. "Believing the next

round will be a better round than the last is what induces (golfers) to want to play more often.”

Vincent presides over TaylorMade-adidas Golf’s R&D department, with more than 100 people involved in engineering and creating golf clubs. “When you talk about regulation more than you talk about playing golf, you are on the wrong side of the fence,” he says. “In other sports they celebrate record-breaking performances,” he points out.

“We know that the winner in the Olympics does not set the pace for all people who participate in the sport,” adds Vincent. “Why in golf are we so afraid of the great records and worried about what is going to happen to the mass of golfers, as if they are suddenly going to stop playing?”

Fellows is less strident in his thinking. “I wouldn’t presume to lay the blame for this on any single entity,” he says. “It’s important for us to remember that we’re all in this great game together, and we all have some measure of responsibility to its overall health.”

There is a sense among manufacturers that despite their innovations, it is more difficult to

make money than it used to be and that the USGA is hurting not helping. Some of the talk at last fall’s GOLF 20/20 Summit – liberally populated by manufacturers – was about refocusing on less ambitious goals, even as the programs it helped spawn continue to expand (Play Golf America being one of the key efforts).

Uihlein says that many of the grow-the-game initiatives miss the point. Golf grew in the last decades of the 20th century because the middle class grew, because there were facilities that allowed practice and play, and because there has been a strong teaching infrastructure – in the form of The PGA of America – in place for some time. Golf requires time and discretionary income. The baby boom may be the last generation for a while where so many people had a surplus of both.

“We go to other countries, and we spend a lot of time at the grass roots level explaining how and why golf gets to be popular,” says Uihlein. “It helps explain why in Central and South America it’s not popular. There is no middle class and no PGA of Latin America.”

“They (PGA Professionals) also have this incredible network of connections with members and players at their clubs.”

In any discussion about equipment, regulation and the health of the game, “they have to be a source of information.”

**—Tim Finchem,
commissioner,
PGA Tour**



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—Brent Krause, PGA Master Professional, Wynlakes G. & C.C., Montgomery, Ala.



Regulation Isn't Limiting Golfers

Uihlein's analysis may not have many adherents among the leaders in the golf industry, but some variation of it rings true with many on the ground.

"I don't think regulation has had anything to do with people not playing," says Ford, the 1987 PGA Golf Professional of the Year. He sees two factors having the greatest effect. First, people have many more diversions than they ever did before, including the Internet. And second, families are demanding more of fathers than they ever did before. Dads spend their weekends at their children's soccer and baseball games, leaving less time for golf.

Yet Ford is not pessimistic. "I think the game is incredibly healthy," he says. "We are in a drop, but I don't see going through what tennis and bowling went through. We are getting banged around, but we are not on the way down."

Morton, who sees a broad socio-economic range at Haggin Oaks, agrees. "In my mind, the most difficult issue facing the game is time," says Morton.

For all the USGA's focus on equipment, it recognizes exactly what Morton and Ford are talking about. "Like every other free time activity, [golf] is under heavier competition," says Ruge. "And that applies to not just sports, but any family activity. They are totally unrelated to [golf equipment] regulations.

"I believe the debate over equipment is mostly an

inside the Beltway issue and has virtually zero effect on whether someone on Saturday morning wants to play or not."

Equipment's Effect on the Future

So, although no one sees equipment as either the savior or the destroyer of golf, it is still central to the discussion of the future of the game. And everyone agrees that the USGA and R&A should be the propagators of the Rules that regulate all aspects of the game. The disagreement is about how they do that job.

PGA Professionals are generally more supportive of the governing bodies' need to create rules and regulations.

"Equipment has to be regulated," says Pizzica. "The USGA makes them; the manufacturers need to follow the rules. I think it's important. And the avid player feels the same way."

Brent Krause agrees, but he doesn't want the USGA to forget that the ultimate goal of regulation is not the health of the governing bodies, but the health of the game.

"I think recent technology has just pushed the envelope; maximized tolerances; and challenged the governing bodies," he says. "That's progress – and that, too, is a good thing."

The USGA takes its role very seriously and will not be backing off anytime soon.

"In a nutshell, we are pleased overall with the state of our game," says Marty Parkes, the USGA's senior director, communications. "There are always issues, always problems, always shortcomings. We have any number of core programs that are in constant operation to maintain the health and well being of our national championships, our handicap system, the Rules of Golf and amateur status, equipment standards, turfgrass research and maintenance

"Everybody is in the constant search for the new piece of equipment that will help their games, including me."

—Bob Ford, PGA head professional, Oakmont (Pa.) C.C.; Seminole G.C., Juno Beach, Fla.



Statement of Principles

On May 9, 2002, the USGA and The R&A issued a Joint Statement of Principles regarding the improvement of golf clubs and balls. Excerpts include:

"History has proved that it is impossible to foresee the developments in golf equipment that advancing technology will deliver. It is of the greatest importance to golf's continuing appeal that such advances are judged against a clear and broadly accepted series of principles."

"...The R&A and the USGA will remain vigilant when considering equipment Rules. The purpose of the Rules is to protect golf's best traditions, to prevent an over-reliance on technological advances rather than skill, and to ensure that skill is the dominant element of success throughout the game."

"The R&A and the USGA continue to believe that the retention of a single set of rules for all players of the game, irrespective of ability, is one of golf's greatest strengths."

"Golf balls used by the vast majority of highly skilled players today have largely reached the performance limits for initial velocity and overall distance which have been part of the Rules since 1976. The governing bodies believe that golf balls, when hit by highly skilled golfers, should not of themselves fly significantly farther than they do today."

"...any further significant increases in hitting distances at the highest level are undesirable."

Source: USGA

practices, preserving the history and traditions of our game, and growing the game through the allocation of millions of dollars annually to ensure that those who haven't had the chance to experience our sport will do so in the years ahead.

"Growth, however, is not the yardstick by which we judge success or failure.... I would contend that we look at our role as one of governing the game responsibly and effectively so that all constituencies – tourists, manufacturers, amateurs – enjoy a healthy climate in which to pursue a favorite and rewarding pastime that can be passed from one generation to the next."

Rugge says that within that context, there is little likelihood that the USGA will push equipment standards back to some nostalgic past. But in keeping with the statement of principles, he does say that the USGA wants to maintain today's equilibrium.

"The PGA of America recognizes the important role the USGA serves the game in its study of equipment," says PGA President Warren. "The USGA's acknowledged role as the Rule-making body for golf is critical to establishing the standards of play both for every day players and professional competitions.

"We are looking closely at the information being provided by golf manufacturers, the USGA and the PGA Tour. While scoring has remained relatively even over the last 15 years on the PGA Tour, golf course set ups are 4-to-5 percent longer and tour players are driving it 8-to-9 percent further. The question is, 'where is this all leading?' I know we're all interested in that answer."

Morton makes his living based on how well he can bring customers to his golf courses, and with about

300,000 rounds in 2005, he sees a lot of them. They run the gamut from serious avid golfers who want to experience an Alister MacKenzie track, to range rats who only come out at night.

"The question isn't whether the standards are wrong," Morton says. "If you want to make the game hard, just grow grass and add bunkers.... I feel so strongly about this. If we want to kill the game completely, then roll back the technology."

Ping's Solheim cautions: "If innovation is stymied, or only left to leak out in spurts when the USGA deems it appropriate, I fear for the long-term health of this great sport."

Nike Golf's Wood, like his peers, often finds it difficult to understand the USGA's motives. But he believes that only through continued dialogue can the game find its way. And he believes PGA Professionals have more power to influence the

argument than any other group.

"When Ely (Callaway) came out with the ERC II, the (PGA) Professionals did not get behind it." And the result was a golf club that failed in the marketplace.

The dialogue needs to start with the PGA Professional, he says, and it needs to remind everyone in the discussion that what matters most is what is happening on tee boxes and fairways throughout the country. □

Industry veteran and former Golf World Business Editor **Mark S. Murphy** contributes monthly *Business-to-Business* coverage in PGA Magazine.

"I think (golf's governing bodies) have done a good job of regulating equipment to this point, and we don't need any new restrictions."

**—Wayne DeFrancesco,
PGA teaching
professional,
Woodholme C.C.,
Baltimore, Md.**

