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When Performance Matters

Golf Industry Sheepdogs Call to Rollback the Ball

By Richard Zokol, Founder, MindLink Golf Technologies (December, 2017)

Lt. Col. (retired) Dave Grossman is an expert in security and an author who specializes in the psychology of killing and protection. He was quoted in the movie *American Sniper* from one of his written articles, *"most of the people in our society are sheep, then there are sheepdogs who live to protect sheep from the wolves."*

The game of golf and the spirit of the game are constantly at risk and in need of protection. It is incumbent on our leaders (the game's Sheepdogs) to protect the game (the Sheep) from those who seek to exploit the game (the Wolves). This sheep, sheepdog, and wolf analogy frames the positions of those involved in this contentious debate about rolling back the distance today's golf ball travels. For the purpose of this discussion let's limit the conversation to just the professional game.

There have been many sheepdogs protecting the game over the centuries. Bobby Jones comes to mind as one of America's first great leaders who not only established but also protected the values, principles and spirit of the game. Byron Nelson was another. In fact there have been many sheepdogs in the golf industry. Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player are others. Arnold Palmer may have said it best, *"Success in golf depends less on strength of body and more on strength of mind and character."* So true, so succinct.

Yet, the game at the highest level has moved in quite the opposite direction from Arnie's words of wisdom.

Technological advancements in modern golf equipment is blurring the line. When technology allows a player to advance without otherwise improving their fundamental skillset it violates the spirit of the game. This trend should alert our sheepdogs. One powerful illustration? Advances in golf ball technology are designed to make the ball spin less causing the ball to travel significantly further and straighter than balls of the past.

Other advancements adding to the issue include the driver head and the shaft. The enlarged sizes of driver heads (up to 460cc) alone significantly magnify the "sweet-spot" or the *Moment of Inertia* (MOI) resulting in longer, straighter drives and reducing the penalty for off-centre strikes.

Yet another advancement, thin-faced drivers, increases the benefit of the "trampoline effect" or the *Coefficient of Restitution* (COR), this spring-like affect propels the ball faster off the club face with energy transfer from the club head to the golf ball. As a point of reference the COR at .780 or 78% allows a zero energy transfer. The USGA and R&A in recent years increased the maximum COR to .830 or 83%.

This technological 'cocktail' combined with the club head speed generated by any era of the PGA Tour's longest drivers produces the golf equivalent of a nuclear reaction at impact. The consequences of this fallout are cancerous to the spirit of the game.

The unfortunate result of these technological advancements is that they exponentially benefit the players who need the assist the least, Tour players. It is the bombers in professional golf that reap the greatest gains, to the detriment of the world's iconic golf courses, which are being rendered obsolete. Not to mention the confusion for the 55-million golfers around the globe who are left to navigate through a maze of technical jargon and terminology in the search for greater enjoyment on the golf course.

Without our sheepdogs to safeguard the sheep from the wolves, will the bombers on the PGA Tour be hitting 400+yd drives on a regular basis 20-years from now? Sheepdogs like Palmer, Nicklaus, Player and most recently Tiger Woods have spoken for change, to rollback the distance of the golf ball for the pro game.

There is a current thrashing of the spirit of the game driven by the prodigious distances the PGA Tour's longest drivers are crushing the golf ball. The USGA and the R&A failed to protect the flock. And have been weakened in their ability to do so through legal precedent (see *Karsten Manufacturing Corporation v. United States Golf Association, (1990)*). The out-of-court settlement from that case still echoes in the present from a decision of 27 years ago about groove specifications.

"Ever since Ping forced the USGA to accept its terms, the ruling body's willingness to use its power to legislate equipment design has been compromised," said former PGA Tour commissioner Deane Beman. *"The probability for potential lawsuit has opened the floodgates to a technological revolution in clubs and balls,"* Beman stated. Beman then added, *"They (the USGA & R&A) made a choice to protect its treasury instead of the game."* In the USGA's capitulation, the wolves emasculated our governing bodies, and the wolves are feasting.

The question now is can the genie be put back in the bottle?

We all know that change is inevitable. But do we want wolves to mangle the sheep? Major League Baseball never allowed aluminum bats to infiltrate their game in order to protect the spirit of baseball and sacred ballparks like Wrigley Field and Fenway Park. Is it too late for golf? Do we bifurcate golf ball rules and specifications for professional golf only?

The primary factors impacting distance are based on ball speed, launch angle and spin rate of the golf ball off the clubface. Ball speed is a function of the player's club head speed in combination of how consistently the player finds the "sweet-spot" at impact. PGA Tour players with the fastest club head speed are Tony Finau (124 mph), Sergio Garcia (123mph), Dustin Johnson (122 mph), and Bubba Watson (121 mph). Jack Nicklaus first tested his club head speed in 1998; it was recorded at 118 mph. Jack was 58 years old in 1998.

Who knows what Nicklaus' club head speed was in his prime but 118 mph is especially impressive when you consider Tiger Woods' ball speed was touching 180 mph at the *2017 Hero World Championship*, which means Tiger's club head speed is calculated in the 120 mph range at the age of 42 after four back surgeries that include spinal fusion surgery!

In 1980, my friend Dan Pohl was statistically the longest driver on the PGA Tour averaging 274 yds. It is presumed Dan Pohl's club head speed in 1980 was similar to today's power hitters. In 1980, the PGA Tour distance average was 257 yds. In 2017, Rory McIlroy averaged 317 yds. with his tee-shots and the PGA Tour average was 293 yds.

Another leading bomber in today's PGA Tour is Brooks Koepka. In Koepka's impressive victory in the *2017 US Open* at Erin Hills we watched this tremendous player strike a 357 yd. 3-wood off the tee on the 72nd hole. Moreover, it was reported Koepka did not have a 2nd shot to a Par 4 that required more than a 7-iron in any of the four rounds on the longest golf course (7,839 yds.) in major championship golf history.

The longest drivers of the golf ball on today's PGA Tour are making a mockery of our great golf courses. Who could not have been shocked when Bubba Watson struck that astonishing tee-shot on the 13th hole during the final round of the *2014 Masters*. Watson's unleashed an atomic drive covering 400+yds on the famous dogleg left par 5 of 510 yds. His tee shot left him with a flip sand-wedge for his second shot. Dr. Alister MacKenzie and Bobby Jones, the architects of Augusta National, would surely have wept had they witnessed those two shots bringing an iconic par 5 to its knees. The USGA and R&A, who are responsible for protecting the true spirit of the game and its honourable traditions, looked the other way when standing their post.

I'd like to make a suggestion to solve this issue... legislate the Rules of Golf to outlaw the "golf-tee." Golfers would be required to place their ball on the ground in the tee box for each tee-shot – that ball is in play. Or simply bifurcate the ball and regulate the golf ball to spin more, reduce drive head size to well under 400cc and lower the COR to .780 for PGA Tour level competition only. Let's solve this problem and bring the art of ball-striking back to the game. Either way, the status quo is carnivorous to the game. What do you think?