

Nathan Crace's

LIPQUTS™

USGA Puts Its Foot Down...Almost

By: Nathan Crace Date: April 25, 2005

Just two weeks ago, Tiger Woods officially broke out of his "slump" and won his fourth Masters—even if he did limp in with consecutive bogies on the final two holes of regulation. With Chris DiMarco fighting tooth and nail on the back nine, Tiger's stumble almost cost him. He did of course manage to silence any would-be critics on the first playoff hole with a convincing birdie. However, the shot that everyone remembers cannot be found anywhere on the last two holes of regulation or fifteen of the other sixteen holes for that matter. What we all remember about Tiger's resurgence on that Sunday in April was the improbable—if not impossible—chip in for birdie on the 16th hole. With DiMarco surveying a birdie putt straight up the hill on the waterfront green, Woods was deciding how to negotiate his second from off the green left of the pin. To say the shot was tricky would be to say that Nicklaus's six green jackets are simply a fashion statement. And no sooner had Lanny Watkins declared form the tower at eighteen that Woods would be lucky to keep his shot on the green, we witnessed the ball skip to the top of the green, apply its brakes, and begin its almost painfully slow decent toward the hole. With each revolution down the slippery green, there were the thoughts in our collective heads of "I can't believe it's turning toward the hole....that it's going to be close...that it's going in...oh, it stopped...it fell in!"

For the record, I do not subscribe to the theory of some that if not for the thunderous applause of the crowd the ball would have hung on the lip. That's immaterial. What's not immaterial is the fact that Nike got Tiger's weight in gold in that instant when his Nike One Platinum ball hung on the edge of the cup with the slightly askew swoosh staring us in the face. Look for the commercial to air the week of the Zurich Classic in New Orleans. I've seen it and it's good. But for all the fanfare and the free ball advertising on Masters Sunday, it was the day after that had the executives at Nike and other ball manufacturers scratching their heads. For on that Monday, an email from the USGA's Dick Rugge to all ball manufacturers shook the collective conscious of its recipients.

The governing body's technical director "asked" each of the companies to design and manufacture prototype golf balls that would comply with modified rules reducing the current maximum ball distance by 15 and 25 yards. Is this the ball rollback we've heard some of the games greats (and most architects) demanding for years now? Those of us who have collectively been grouped and labeled "traditionalists" as if it's some negative moniker want to know. For the record, Mr. Rugge would only say that he wouldn't comment because the e-mail was intended to be a "private communication between the USGA and the manufacturers." Fair enough. But for me, it was at the same time as intriguing as it was difficult to believe. I've been waiting for the USGA to put its foot down and say enough is enough and slow things down in the distance game. As a result, I have been accused as one of the aforementioned vile "traditionalists" of wanting to stifle technological advances for my own benefit. That's ridiculous when you consider that longer balls call for longer courses—and renovations to existing courses. As any architect will tell, one of our favorite projects is a renovation project. It's a genuine thrill to take an outdated course and breathe into it new life for its owners, members, and golfers. It's exciting to be part of and witness to the transition process. I just want to see the true classic courses preserved in some semblance of their current state.

Our (speaking for the group of technological infidels) concern is for the increasingly rapid gains in ball distance. If you want to play a driver that gives you more forgiveness off the tee, I'm all for it. That makes the game more enjoyable for everyone—including the group behind you who grows tired of your endless searches in the right rough on each hole without allowing them to play through. But the distance a golf ball travels has grown exponentially in the past ten years and it wasn't by accident. Yes, golfers as a group may be more athletic on the professional tours and equipment manufacturers have done a tremendous job of matching custom shafts and materials together in custom-fitting all golfers to the equipment they need as opposed to simply choosing between stiff and regular flex shafts. And I am not naïve enough to think that making changes in ball technology is the only answer. To be effective, tests will have to be conducted with different drivers and irons in an effort to verify conformance. But this is a step forward, right?

As a famous (or infamous) politician once said, that depends on "what your definition of 'is' is." The e-mail itself, obtained by a number of news outlets from anonymous sources, seemed to read more like a suggestion rather than a motion handed down from the almighty governing body of all things golf in our fifty states. Is this the first step in creating one ball for competition and one ball for everyone else? Let's hope the USGA and Royal & Ancient stand behind their decree that they do not want to create different balls (and effectively different rules) for different levels of golfers. We're not talking moving the three-point line out a few inches. We're talking about the essence of the game itself. Part of the reason why we have handicaps is so the better golfers at your club and the sandbaggers...er, higher handicap players...can compete on a level playing field side by side.

I also don't think it would be as radical as literally rolling back the golf ball fifteen years. And it's certainly not going to happen quickly. As governing bodies go, the USGA is no speed demon. Besides, if they were to do so, every golf professional on the planet could squirrel away a couple hundred dozen of today's Pro V balls and make a killing selling them on eBay two years from now. Instead, it appears as though they are looking for "input" from the manufacturers on how to slow things down a bit. I for one would be fine with that and I think my "traditionalist" brethren would agree. You can't turn back the clock fifteen years—it would severely impair the future growth of the game—but you can slow down technology a little.

You can bet the ball manufacturers will be watching the developments in the next few months and years. But don't expect your local rules committee to be seizing your Pro V's and Nike One balls just yet. After all, Tiger's new Nike One Platinum hasn't hit the shelves yet and everyone wants to try and chip in a few before we have to give them up.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2005.