

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE:

Written by TMAC GOLF
Friday, 23 February 2018 13:50

The USGA held its annual meeting last month. Mike Davis, CEO, addressed the audience on a variety of topics. Given the recent comments made by Jack Nicklaus, it is interesting to revisit some of what Davis said last month. Nicklaus indicated through his private conversation with Davis that changes could be coming. However, if accurate, this appears to be a shift from Davis' own words.

“We see a future where player’s scores continue to be fundamentally dictated by his or her athletic and course management skills, not just by equipment and technology. We see a game where putting the ball back in your stance, knocking a ball down, shaping shots with your hands, actively controlling distance, trajectory, spin, or even assessing the wind, assessing elevation changes, being able to read a putt on the green, are all parts that make our great game so great.

“At the same time, we see a future where thoughtful equipment standards can continue to innovate ways to welcome new golfers to the game, where equipment manufacturers work to ensure that golf remains a game of skill, yet makes a game even more welcoming and enjoyable.

“We see a future where golf facilities can provide shorter experiences on small pieces of land. We certainly don’t see 18 hole golf courses going away, and we don’t subscribe to that, but we do see a game that has more options, that take less time, and that a footprint requires less resources to maintain. This can and will still provide a marvelous and fun playing experience.

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“It really is back to that concept of what is golf. It's about taking a club, holding it in your hands, swinging it, hitting a ball and seeing how many shots it takes you to get it into a hole. Sometimes the secret of moving forward really lies in looking to the past.

“The increase in golf's footprint has had many negative ramifications on many parts of the games, costing significantly more to modify existing golf courses, to build new golf course, to maintain golf courses. It uses more natural resources, costs more time to play, and in some cases truly does compromise the architectural integrity of some marvelously designed golf courses, and ladies and gentlemen, to whose benefit, whose benefit?

“Just as important, we see a future where the 33,000 plus golf courses around the world are not asked, or not feel compelled, to constantly change their footprint in the name of accommodating increased distance. Over golf's history, golf courses have grown substantially in size. This has been going on for well over a century.

“It's not just when we went from persimmon, and steel, and balata to titanium and graphite and urethane two piece balls; this has been going on when we went from featheries, to Haskell balls, to gutta perchas, and you ask yourself has the game's changed fundamentally it really hasn't changed, but the amount of space and resources that we're using to maintain golf courses have certainly changed.

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“An astonishing, and perhaps even sobering, example is close to home. At this year’s US Open at Shinnecock Hills we’ll be playing at slightly over 7,400 yards. 122 years ago at the second US Open in 1896, care to guess what that total yardage was; 4,423 yards. That’s a growth of roughly 60% folks. Again, you asked yourself, what did the game get out of it except costing itself more time, more resources that the game really can't afford.

“Don’t read anything into this; I can promise you I don’t want to see a headline in the next week saying that the USGA is bringing back hickories and gutta perchas; we don’t see that happening, but it really does make you wonder, at this trajectory that we've seen what are golf courses going to look like in the future.”

During the USGA’s annual meeting, John Bodenhamer, the USGA’s senior managing director of championships and governance, overseeing its amateur championships and its global governance was questioned what he believes the two biggest challenges facing the game of golf today are.

“In my world, I think of a couple of things as far as challenges, really, when you boil it down to just two; technology certainly to me is. And achieving a balance, working with our governance partner at the R&A and achieving that balance so that the essential elements of skill and judgement that have been hallmarks for our game for centuries remain as hallmarks of our game and aren't compromised, while we still embrace technology.

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“You think about it, over the course of the last century, the USGA and the R&A, our governance of the game, have embraced technology. You think about the golf ball, as Mike (Davis) mentioned, going from featheries now to the two piece ones we almost all of us play today. Hickory shafts; the journey from hickory shafts to steel and now graphite alloys and those lightweight shafts we enjoy. And I certainly grew up playing those little, tiny persimmon heads that I look down on now; I can't even imagine trying to hit that now, and those titanium heads that we enjoy.

“We've embraced DMD's (distance measuring devices), we use them at all of our, most all of our championships, as has the R&A. We've been doing that for a number of years. We have embraced technology. How do we create that balance in a world that technology brings us self-correcting golf balls? I've been at our test center outside and watched Iron Byron hit what would be dialed in as a big slice and technology brings that golf ball back to the fairway?

“Do you think Justin Thomas's 310 yard three wood on the 18th hole in third round of the US Open was a launch? You should see what technology can bring us even more so, much more so, and so on and so on. I think that our challenge is to preserve that and not allow the game to be compromised by, I'll just put it, in buying a game off the shelf, in buying technology, buying a game through technology.

“We want to make sure that, as Mike said earlier, playing the ball back in your stance, or being able to hit the ball high with talent and skill and not technology is critical. I think judgement too; technology and its potential advantage impact there with judgement. You think about now you have your smartphone on the golf course and technology allows smart club heads with chips in them that can tell you in an instant how you hit that golf ball before you even see it go up in the air, under the grip. You can have hats now with sensors in that can read and sense brain waves and your adrenaline levels, or heart monitors that can tell you what your heart is racing to on that last hole of a match.

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“I think for us the challenge there is just to make sure that judgement remains. Me at five foot nine, 170 pounds, and I can plug that all in and know also that at 152 yards and the wind’s blowing three yards into me and it’s an elevation change of four yards up, and I punch all that into my smartphone and it tells me to hit a three quarter seven iron. We want golfers to be able to do that, not technology.

“I think at the USGA, I guess the way I think of it, and I've said this before, it's not our job to make the game harder, but it's also not our job to make the game easier. Our obligation, indeed our responsibility, is to preserve and protect the ancient and honorable traditions, or those essential hallmark elements of skill and element that have been with our game forever, and we want to maintain those. I think we have to explain to young generations, and all generations, why that’s so critical, and we’re working very hard to do so.”

During the question and answer session, Davis was asked specifically if there is any serious thought to reconsidering golf ball restriction, and if not, then why?

“The issue of distance, as we all know, is very, very complex. I will say the USGA is approaching this, and has approached it, and we've been public about this for many years, that we do not think increased distance, particularly at the elite level, is good for the game,” Davis said.

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“Why not; because of some of the pressures we’ve just talked about with golf courses, even golf courses that don’t host major elite events, it seems to affect so many golf courses, having to expand, and we are viewing this very much from the standpoint of while we want to understand the past and be respectful to traditions and history, we really want to look forward and say where is the game going to be in five years, where is it going to be in 25 years, where might it be in 100 years.

“We certainly don’t have a crystal ball, but we are using a lot of data. And I think that we really do fundamentally believe that it’s about holding a golf club, swinging it, hitting a ball and seeing how many strokes it takes to get in a hole. This constant expanding of our footprint and lengthening courses we just don’t believe is a good thing.

“What is the future? Well, we couldn’t say it today, but as we have said publicly before, and what we do in partnership with the R&A as governance, we are very focused on the health of the game and future of the game. With that, we are going to explore a lot of different options in this area.

“I would say, just know that there is a lot of work being done, a lot of research being done, and this isn’t just about the elite game. We want to make sure that the game is welcoming and accessible. As John said, we are not trying to make the game harder, we are not trying to make it easier, but we do want to make it more welcoming.

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“What has happened with technology over the years is that the skills that’s been required to play the game haven't necessarily got easier, but they’ve just changed. Golf balls have changed. Golf clubs have changed. The condition of golf courses have changed. All that plays into it. Just know this, that we are focused on the future and make sure that game is in fact healthy and healthy for all parts of the game.”

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Based on Davis’ and Bodenhamer’s words from just a month ago, its challenging to understand there is a potential change of direction with respect to a possible roll back. Meanwhile, the USGA in its annual meeting gave zero indication any rule changes regarding the golf ball is imminent. Keep in mind the Vancouver Decree, which was published in November of 2011 and explains the process involved for transparency regarding any future equipment or rule changes. And also consider Jack Nicklaus also stated oversized metal woods have historically played a role in the distance topic.

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