

## ME THINKS THOU DOTHTH PROTEST TOO MUCH?

Written by TMAC GOLF

Tuesday, 06 March 2018 08:36

---

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, he turns to his mother and asks her, "Madam, how like you this play?" to which she replies, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." Queen Gertrude's response was to the insincere overacting of a character in the play, created by Prince Hamlet to prove his uncle's guilt in the murder of his father, the King of Denmark. This analogy can be used to compare golf's ongoing love/hate relationship with distance.

Some can't get enough of it and others believe it will be end of the game, as we once knew it. This bipolar view has been in existence for a long, long time. The ruling bodies of golf, stewards of the game, are tasked with viewing the topic from a 30,000 feet perspective both from the past but also with an eye to the future. It's a complicated matter. It also invokes plenty of passion.

The R&A and the USGA released its proprietary research regarding distance. Introduced in 2015, the annual report examines driving distance data from seven of the major worldwide professional golf tours, based on nearly 300,000 drives per year. The data from studies of male and female amateur golfers is also included. Previously the information drew very little attention, however leading up to the most recent findings it came into the spotlight by comments made by the CEO of the R&A, Martin Slumbers as well as Jack Nicklaus at the Honda Classic.

Before getting into some of the details, it can't be stressed enough that this is a complicated topic. It is also somewhat subjective, in terms of the information released and interpreted. Since we live in a society that enjoys communicating in 140 characters or less and prone to rush to judgment, it's virtually impossible to cover this topic properly in any such manner.

First and foremost and before going any further, its important to note the ruling bodies **MAY or MAY NOT** decide to take any action regarding the most recent research findings. So without any further ado, the 2015 and 2016 editions of the distance report presented the increases around 0.2 yards per year since 2003. The 2017 data shows a deviation from this trend. The average distance gain across the seven worldwide tours was more than **3 yards** since 2016.

In previous annual reports, it was noted, variability in driving distance of 4 or more yards from

## ME THINKS THOU DOTH PROTEST TOO MUCH?

Written by TMAC GOLF

Tuesday, 06 March 2018 08:36

---

season to season on any one tour is not uncommon

However, the most recent increase across so many tours in a single season is considered unusual and concerning in the minds and eyes of the ruling bodies and therefore requires closer inspection and monitoring to fully understand the causes and effects.

Before going much further, let's understand the methodology involved in uncovering the data. The average driving distance is typically measured on two holes at each tournament and can result in nearly 40,000 shots being measured over the course of a season on some tours. The vast majority of players on the PGA TOUR (94%) and European Tour (96%) use driver on the holes used for measuring driving distance regardless of their driving distance rank.

The driving distance, for the sake of the research conducted, is the total distance measured from the teeing ground to the point where ball comes to rest – regardless of the location (fairway, rough, bunker, putting green, etc.). This data is collected on the major tours using one of two methods:

Tournament officials will measure incremental distances from the teeing ground, which are then marked on both edges of the fairway of the hole(s) being used for the collection of data. These distance marks are then used by the player, caddie or volunteer collecting the data to determine the distance for a given drive.

A combination of GPS and laser measuring equipment is used to directly measure the distance of each drive on a hole.

Driving distance data typically collected on the two holes is selected taking into account via three criteria:

The holes should be oriented in opposing directions (to minimize the impact of the wind on the average distance).

The holes should preferably both be selected such that the landing area for the drives is flat. Where this is not feasible, the holes would preferably have opposing topography to minimize the effect of slopes on the average driving distance.

The holes should be selected to maximize the potential that the golfers will choose to hit their driver (ensuring that the data most closely reflects the distance hit by players using drivers).

## ME THINKS THOU DOTH PROTEST TOO MUCH?

Written by TMAC GOLF

Tuesday, 06 March 2018 08:36

---

The PGA TOUR introduced the Shotlink system in 2003, which is used at most of its tournaments. This system measures every shot during a tournament, which means that, in addition to the traditional “measured” driving distance on two holes, data are also available for all other par-4 and par-5 holes. The PGA TOUR, [Web.com](#) Tour and PGA TOUR Champions Tour calculate the average driving distance based on all available shots by all players competing in their events. However, only the players who have played a predefined number of qualifying rounds are included for presentation in the end of season summary statistics.

In recent years a player would typically need to play 50 rounds on the PGA TOUR, 35 rounds on the [Web.com](#) Tour or between 35 and 40 rounds on the PGA TOUR Champions Tour for inclusion in the end of season summary statistics. The European Tour only collects data for full members of the tour and subsequently only players who have played 10 or more rounds will be included for presentation in the end of season summary statistics. The Ladies European Tour typically collects data only for full members of the tour, although the data for non-members who fill in a stats card may be included within the raw data. The LPGA reports data only for players who over the course of a season have participated in a minimum of 10 events or 1/3 of the total number of official events, whichever is fewer.

Further analysis shows a comparison of these major professional tours, both men’s and women’s, indicates that the average driving distance on the men’s tours has increased by approximately 2.2% since 2003 until the end of the 2017 season, with a more modest average increase of 0.75% being observed on the ladies’ tours.

The average driving distance of the longest (and shortest) players on the European and PGA tours closely tracks the respective tour average driving distances, including the season-to-season fluctuations. When viewed as percentages, there is consistency both between tours and seasons. The longest 10 players tend to be about 7% longer than the tour average , whereas the shortest 10 players tend to be about 6-8% shorter than the tour average .

In 2017, the average clubhead speed was 113.9 mph, with an average launch angle of 11.1° and average spin of 2,578 rpm. The 90th percentile for clubhead speed was 120.1 mph. These values are very close to the test conditions for the Overall Distance Standard (launch angle of 10°, backspin of 2,520 rpm and a clubhead speed of 120mph), which regulates ball distance.

The PGA TOUR has used a TrackMan RADAR system to measure launch data at

## ME THINKS THOU DOTH PROTEST TOO MUCH?

Written by TMAC GOLF

Tuesday, 06 March 2018 08:36

---

tournaments as part of the Shotlink system since 2007. Data is typically collected on one or two par 4 or par 5 holes at each tournament; although these holes are not always the “measured” driving holes (only 19 out of 38 holes on which RADAR data was reported in 2017 were “measured” driving holes). Since the introduction of logging club selection for tee shots in 2012, this launch data is only reported for shots that are hit with a driver. In practical terms this results in the exclusion of approximately 500-600 shots each year (from a population of 12,000-16,000) and as such its believe it has only a very minor effect on the value of the average launch conditions, according to the USGA and R&A research.

According to the research, the average clubhead speed has increased by 1.5 mph from 2007 to 2017 and ball speed by 3.4 mph. Launch angle in 2017 is 0.3° higher than the 2007 value, while spin is 236 rpm lower in 2017. It is also noteworthy that the launch condition set-up for the Overall Distance Standard is 10° and 2,520 rpm at a clubhead speed of 120 mph.

Hopefully, I haven't lost anyone at this point with all of the numbers involved in this research. A few more things to consider, for those **critical thinkers** out there.

It can be effectively argued there were a multitude of contributing factors, including some anomalies that indicate the distance gains in 2017 are not indicative of a harmful trend and not included in the research findings. For example, PGA TOUR events (including the majors) were contested at 41 venues where data was collected, 33 of which were conducted at the same course as 2016. The data from the same venues as compared to new venues could be significantly different and warrants review and comment. Strictly viewing through the lens of the PGA TOUR, the average driving distance for all events increased 1.9 yards while the average distance change at events hosted at the same venue was merely +0.5 yards. For these “same venue” events when comparing the players who played in both 2016 and 2017, the average driving distance decreased -1.0 yard.

The 2017 Masters average driving distance declined by 0.4 yards! At new venues (8 events), including the US Open, the Open Championship and PGA Championship, the average distance increased was 8.0 yards, evidence that course selection and set-up was a major contributing factor in the 2017 gains. The US Open had the single largest change from 2016 (Oakmont) as compared to 2017 (Erin Hills) with an increase of a whopping 20.4 yards! This significant increase **represented 25%**

of the total increase in 2017. In addition to the course set-up difference (fairway width and firm surfaces) the 2016 event had substantial rain Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, which affected

## ME THINKS THOU DOTHT PROTEST TOO MUCH?

Written by TMAC GOLF

Tuesday, 06 March 2018 08:36

---

playing surfaces and distances.

The Open Championship was also among the most significant increases at +8.1 yards in 2017 (Royal Birkdale) as compared to 2016 (Royal Troon). This event alone **represented 9%** of the 2017 gain. The PGA Championship had an average driving distance gain of +7.0 yards in 2017 (Quail Hollow) as compared to 2016 (Baltusrol). This

**represented 8%**

of the total increase in 2017. Weather in 2016 again was a contributing factor to the distance comparison as Baltusrol had heavy rainfall throughout the event. These three Majors

**represent 42% of the total distance gains in 2017**

, which would support the premise and calls into question that site selection, set up and weather were contributing factors. Some cynics might imply it is the equivalent of rigging the jury, however Mother Nature is beyond reproach!

So with any research, some will accept it unconditionally. Others will challenge some or all of its findings, including the methodologies involved. But that being said, the USGA/R&A intend to conduct a conversation about the effects of distance prior to making any specific proposals. There isn't any fixed timetable, it said, but it will begin this process immediately in an effort to reach a conclusion as promptly as possible. Therefore, it **MAY or MAY NOT** prompt action. It remains to be seen. One other item that clearly has influence on distance reported is temperature, which was omitted in all of the information released. For example, the cooler it is the less a ball will travel. Consider then the difference in temperatures from month to month but just as important the major championship. The sweltering heat endured from a U.S. Open or PGA Championship is rarely experienced at The Open Championship or the Masters. Just another element (pun intended) that can influence the results!

For those with more time on their hands or their passion overflows on the topic, the 2017 Distance Report is available for viewing by clicking on the following link: [2017 Distance Report](#)

```
(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){
(i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o),
m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m)
})(window,document,'script','//www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga');
ga('create','UA-43241989-1','golfbiz.net');
ga('send','pageview');
```