

ITS A FACT, ACCORDING TO JACK!

Written by TMAC GOLF

Friday, 23 February 2018 13:45

As pointed out in the [February 13th issue](#) , under the **BANK THE DRUM SLOWLY** heading, some in the golf industry want a back to the future approach to the game. A week later and more evidence is continuing to mount that the ruling bodies of the game have hatched a plan to roll back the distance golf balls travel. “I had dinner with Mike Davis Sunday night, and Mike said, ‘We're getting there. We're going to get there.’ He said, ‘I need your help when we get there,” Jack Nicklaus revealed at the Honda Classic. “I said, ‘That's fine. I'm happy to help you. I've only been yelling at you for 40 years.’ 1977 is the first time I went to the USGA. I said, ‘I assume you're going to study for another ten years or so, though.’ He says, ‘Oh, no, no, no. We're not going to do that. I think we're getting closer to agreements with the R&A and be able to do some things and be able to help.’ I've talked to Mike a lot. Mike's been very optimistic about wanting to get something done but hasn't been able to get there yet.”

The Golden Bear, who's namesake company produces golf balls, didn't pull any punches on the topic when sitting down with the assembled media. “ '77 was the year that Titleist brought out the big dimpled golf ball and the ball went further, and it went further than anybody else's ball, by quite a ways. I was playing MacGregor. But I saw what was happening with it. And then I saw companies trying to change and make different things. I said, Whoops, we're going to get into a war on how far the golf ball goes.

“Titleist basically controls the game. Titleist, the other manufacturers, they don't make the rules of the game. I don't understand why Titleist would be against it; I know they are, but I don't understand why you would be against it. They make probably the best product, and if they make the best product, whether it's 20 percent shorter, why, what difference would it make? Their market share isn't going to change a bit. They are still going to dominate the game,” Nicklaus said. “I don't think the golf ball manufacturers are going to have a big problem if they did (a roll back).”

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Make no mistake, Nicklaus has strong feelings on the topic. "The golf ball is the biggest culprit. We used to play golf courses 6,500 yards, 6,600 yards and that was a championship golf course. Today you're 7,500 or 7,600 yards. The older golf courses, the tees, the greens, were very close together. The golf courses built today, they spread them out for real estate purposes," he said. "There's three things we have in the game of golf that really causes it to be slow and take longer: And that's the golf ball, but it's the length the golf course, the time that we play. The amount of money it costs is a very big detriment to the game because if you have more land and more fertilizer, more water, it costs more money. It costs more to play the game, and the game is pretty difficult."

On the matter of the time required to play golf, Nicklaus believes a change in distance would help. "I think it just takes longer to play. I don't think that's good. I think the golf ball, if you bring it back 20 percent, you know, that brings it back to about what it was in about 1995 when we played last wound golf ball," he said.

Nicklaus has another way to benefit the game. "If you don't change the golf ball, rate the golf courses. Rate the golf courses: 100 percent golf course, 90 percent, 80 percent, 70 percent, 60 percent golf ball, and then have the golf ball manufacturers make a golf ball that fits that golf course," he explained.

"If you do that, then the manufacturers make a whole bunch more golf balls and a whole bunch more skews for them to sell. And what that means is when you get a golf course that you might rate it as an 80 percent golf course or 70 percent golf course, 70 percent golf ball. 80 percent balls are what we played in 1995 for all intents and purposes. Was that a bad golf ball? No. People played a lot of good golf with that. But you don't need 7,500 yards to play it.

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“And so then if a guy wants to play with a 90 or 100 percent golf ball, it makes it shorter and faster for him to play. We've got a lot of places where we've got golf courses we want to redo and we've got maybe 105 or 110 acres and they have a nice 5,800- or 5,900-yard golf course and they say: What do we do, how do we compete and how can we sell this product? I say, well you can sell it with a 75 percent golf ball or 70 percent golf ball, and somebody wants to play with a regular golf ball, it's faster. But I mean, if you have the USGA, which I've talked to Mike quite a bit about, get the golf associations around the country to rate courses, then it becomes the manufacturers, and the manufacturers sell a lot more golf balls. And most people play 90 percent of their golf at one golf course, anyway. If you went to that one golf course with a 70 percent ball and played it, then your friend comes along, fine, go ahead and play. You'll adjust a handicap adjustment for it, and go play. I think you can do that. Then you don't have any obsolete golf courses.”

This might sound good in theory but in practice is another matter. While companies could sell more versions of balls, it doesn't mean the annual aggregate consumption rate changes. It could and likely lead to inventories issues as the market eventually will adopt only a few models. Meanwhile, retailers to manufacturers will have over estimated the 70% ball, or example under Nicklaus' example. But everyone is entitled to their opinion!

“The game (which one: pro or recreational?) is a great game today the way it is. The game when I played was a great game. The game they played 20 years before me is a great game. However, as time changes, I think you need to change with the times. The times today, people don't have the time to spend playing five hours to play golf. A lot of people don't have the money to be able to do that, and they find the game very frustrating and very difficult,” said Nicklaus. These facts haven't changed in 20 years and likely won't in another 20 years. Golf courses around the world to the PGA TOUR/USGA/R&A/European Tour haven't been able to police the time it takes to play the game! The European Tour announced in October, it is experimenting with a [shot clock](#) this year. Why is that? Since they haven't been able to improve the pace of play! Yet, rolling back the distance of a golf ball will suddenly, if not magically, cure all of this?!

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“So if the golf ball came back, it would solve I think a lot of those issues, and it would make, I think we only have one golf course in this country, my opinion, that's not obsolete to the golf ball and that's Augusta National,” Nicklaus continued. Just a quick show of hands, how many people have the opportunity to play Augusta? Never mind! “They are the only people that have enough money that have been able to keep the golf course and do the things you had to. They are even buying up parts of country clubs and roads and everything else to get that done,” Nicklaus continued. This is an important comment, even if it sounds like Jack is rambling, which he is. He is speaking specifically to the professional game with regards to Augusta and the recreational game when it comes to the expense of playing. There is a huge difference (Grand Canyon like) between these two factions! Meanwhile, there isn't any empirical evidence on record that indicates any golf course in the world, let alone the United States, has become obsolete with recreational players! Not one!!

“I didn't think that the game of golf should be dictated by how far a golf ball goes. It's how well you play the golf ball, not how far you hit it,” said Nicklaus revealing further his bias on the matter. “And even though I was a long hitter, I always enjoyed shorter golf courses, frankly. I thought it took more skill to play them and I thought it was more reward to go work your way around rather than just pounding it out. I could pound it out obviously a long way because I hit it a long way, but that's not what I really thought the game of golf was all about.” Meanwhile, the professional game, specifically on the PGA TOUR has a one-dimensional approach towards length and a bomb and gouge approach. Meanwhile, the longest hitters don't often win. But why let the facts get in the USGA's way. They see golf differently, for right or wrong, than the rest of the world.

Keep in mind, if the ball was to be rolled back, there isn't any proof to imply the cost of the game would go down. Operational expenses should decline, but that doesn't mean it would be passed on to the consumer as that would be at the discretion of each course owner/operator. Given the challenges an overwhelming majority of courses are facing, an effective argument

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can be made that they would maintain rates and lock in the additional "income." Meanwhile, in the professional game the long bombers will still be the long bombers relative to the rest of the field. So who is really impacted by this decision?

What if the time required to play remains the same under a roll back? What if the cost to the end user, the person paying everyone's bar tab at the end of the day, is the same? It has always been and will remain a difficult game, so what has been solved if a roll back doesn't deliver as suggested?

Meanwhile, its highly unlikely that Titleist is going to take this lying down. Now that it is a public company, it risks a shareholder lawsuit should its revenue stream become impacted by any of these changes and it did nothing to protect its interests. Therefore, it would be somewhat forced to challenge the governing bodies or otherwise face the consequences if it all goes wrong. Does anyone recall what happened when the USGA forced a change in grooves? What was the impact it had on scoring on the PGA TOUR? It offered a temporary replacement cycle for equipment companies and retailers but it didn't last very long. At the end of the exercise did it really have any lasting consequences on the professional game as we look back?

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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'); ic of the golf ball distance isn't going away. Acushnet (GOLF: NYSE) will be reporting its earnings shortly and it should gain some attention from Wall Street analysts. As Martin Slumbers, CEO of the R&A, reported last week, the distance report is expected to be released shortly, which should gain further scrutiny to the matter. Stay tuned.