

8,000 Yards With a Bullet

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It's just human nature to assess things with numbers. They provide a fairly objective way to measure performance, weigh options, and make critical decisions. Numbers supposedly eliminate our dependence on subjective decision-making and give concrete and substantial support to a person's selection of one alternative over another. They provide delineation between everything from which size drink is the best value at a convenience store to the demographic profile your family matches and everything in between. In fact, one's entire life is a numbers game of sorts and it's a game that starts as early as birth. Consider this: one of the first questions asked of the proud parents of every newborn baby is "How much did he weigh?"

So if numbers are so important in our everyday lives, why should sports be any different? In baseball, bat above .300 and you're great (although performing at thirty percent efficiency doesn't seem so impressive in the real world). For running backs and quarterbacks, there's the 100-yard and 300-yard game, respectively. Basketball has the triple-double and in shuffleboard...well you have me there. So what's the big numbers game in golf? Shooting 59? Nope. The 300-yard drive? Not anymore, but that does hit close. Think about this: when you go to a golf course you will be playing for the first time and you are standing in the golf shop waiting to pay, you pick up a scorecard and do what? You look to see if the yardage from the back tees is more or less than 7,000 yards. We all do it—whether we play from the back tees or not. Most of those who do it don't even need to be playing from back there anyway, but the 7,000 yard mark has somehow grown to be some type of twisted litmus test for new golf courses.

What's the fascination with 7,000 yards and when did it become the benchmark? Most U.S. Open venues and a lot of the "classic" courses don't even make the mark. Pebble Beach, Merion, even Pine Valley all fall short of the 7K mark. Unfortunately, the trend of longer courses causes technological advances that enable less-skilled players to keep up with others, which in turn causes increased demands for lengthy courses. Where will it end? How about 8,000 yards? Don't laugh—if technology is not kept in check, such yardages may be closer than you think!!

I realize that a lot of people reading this disagree with what I'm saying. They say that making the game easier to play brings more people into the game and that's good. However, the same hypocrites with the ERC II drivers in their bags would rather lose their drinkin' arm than let Jeff Gordon drive without the same restrictor plates everyone else has on their cars. So Mark McGwire uses Creatine...big deal! I contend, however, that longer drives do not make the game easier, but perhaps more difficult. While cavity-back irons make the game easier for high handicappers by correcting less-than-perfect impact on the club face, titanium drivers the size of my mailbox only allow the 18-handicapper who has been slicing his 245-yard drive into the right rough to now slice his 280-yard drive onto the green two holes over. That's not easier, that's dangerous—and it turns a 4-hour round into 5½! Consider that fairways have to be made wider and more room set aside to surround green complexes to keep golfers from careening a tee shot off someone's cranium and an argument could be made that longer courses make golf more expensive because more land (usually fairly expensive) has to be purchased just to meet the demands of the market. And that extra land has to be maintained.

Every year, more old courses become obsolete—many of them landlocked with no room to grow. I personally do not want to play an 8,000-yard course or even a 7,400-yard course for that matter—you feel beat up at the end of the round. Golf is a game of skill and precision—not brute strength—a fact that seems to be lost on most people since the day that then-abnormally long drives were thrust into the spotlight of the PGA Tour during John Daly's 1991 PGA Championship win at Crooked Stick. Tiger Woods could probably out drive most of us if he used a green walnut and a tire iron, but he is so good because he has tremendous skills—he hits it long and straight. I only hope we don't look back years from now and regret what technology—not skill—has done to the great old courses and the game as a whole. You want to hit 350-yard drives? Get in shape, take a dozen or so lessons, and spend some practice time on the range. At least you'll have a better chance of keeping it in your own ZIP code off the tee.

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