

Are You Hot?

By: Nathan Crace Date: August 25, 2003

Are you hot? And I don't mean that in the grotesquely-absurd-ABC-network-reality-show sense of the term. I mean are you hot? Or more precisely, is your driver hot? Not to say that it wouldn't be funny to have "Are You Hot?" judge Lorenzo Lamas on the first tee of each PGA Tour event, critiquing the players' equipment with his laser pointer: "You know Phil, I love the tone of your forearms; but the spring-like effect of your driver's clubface is just too much for me." By definition, of course, "hot" equates to a driver that violates the USGA's coefficient of restitution limit that creates a spring-like effect for the ball off the clubface. For a few weeks this summer, it was the hot topic on the PGA Tour. Has the golf world just realized that there are golfers in the world playing with drivers that do not conform to the USGA's increasingly lax rules on golf club design and construction? What a shock! So why the uproar now? Two words: Tiger Woods. To his credit, he didn't have to say anything. Of course, he cannot win that debate either in the eyes of the media. Woods used to be criticized for not speaking out enough. "Where does the world's number one player stand on Augusta National's no female member policy?" "Why doesn't Woods bemoan Hootie Johnson?" Now that he elected this summer to shed light on a "fellow player" using a non-conforming driver, the media wants to know who, what, where, when, and why. "He shouldn't say such things if he's not going to give us a name." "Why would the world's number one player make such accusations?" Sometimes, you just can't win...

So for the benefit of this argument regarding Coefficient of Restitution (COR), let's agree to eliminate the Tiger Woods factor (we'll call it TW). Although he does hit it long, he himself admits he is more concerned about accuracy and scoring than out-driving everyone else. In fact, I don't know why people act so surprised about the length of today's drives. The USGA has been systematically sabotaging the rules of the game for more than a decade. I suppose the most recent subterfuge began with the "settlement" with Ping over the square grooves with radius edges. It then escalated to oversized drivers, hot golf balls, and even inserts in iron faces that actually increase spin. So why now the outcry? Even PGA Tour commissioner Tim Finchem (we'll call him TF) says the testing, which begins next year, will be voluntary because golf is a gentlemen's game and he doesn't think anyone is violating the rules. If no one is violating the rules, why bother with testing? This argument makes about as much sense as the big tobacco companies running commercials on television and radio about helping smokers quit. Why would they want them to quit—especially if there's nothing unsafe about it? All Finchem is doing is giving his players a "heads up" so they won't get caught with their "head covers" down. Why not test the top ten finishers each week? NASCAR had to start a similar approach to stop cheaters. Why not the TOUR?

The unfortunate fact is that, like everything else, it has come to money (we'll call it CASH). In order to "grow the game" the USGA long ago sold its soul to the manufacturers (HOGS) by not only allowing them to push the envelope, but also by changing the envelope to better fit the needs of the club makers. So if more people will play golf if they can hit the ball 320 yards (LONG), we'll let the manufacturers beef up the equipment and make it more "fun" for everyone. Never mind that a 20-handicapper who cannot hit a fairway 220 yards in front of him now cannot hit a fairway 300 yards in front of him (AIM), it's more fun now! Right? Who cares if it takes 5 hours to play 18 holes now because people are looking for their errant drives two fairways over? It's more fun! Right? I actually played golf with a player not too long ago that was upset because he was only hitting his new driver about 290! He was flying the ball past me by 30 yards! And he still shot 94! At the NEC at Firestone in Akron, Ohio, players were hitting 7-irons into 220 yard par 3's! Doesn't anyone else see how ridiculous this is becoming? And these are just juiced up balls and irons—not even under the scope of the COR debate!

If the USGA won't stand up for itself, then maybe it's time for a change at the top (LEADERS) while it can still be effective. Sure everyone loves to kill a drive when you catch it just right in the center of the clubface. But when you can hit it 270 off the toe every time, something's wrong. Like everything else, people will soon grow tired of 320 yard drives and courses will stretch to 8,000 yards to meet increased demand. So testing drivers on the TOUR may be a start (sort of), but it may be too little to late if the USGA does not step up to the plate to amend the following revised formula for determining coefficient of restitution (COR):

$$\text{COR} = (\text{USGA} - \text{LEADERS}) + (\text{TF} - \text{TW}) \times (\text{HOGS} \times \text{CASH}^n) \times 320(\text{LONG} - \text{AIM})$$

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 2003.