

Nathan Crace's

# LIPQUTS™

## Long Distance Love Affair

By: Nathan Crace    Date: December 16, 2003

To paraphrase the great golf instructor Harvey Penick, "Golf is not a game of how far, but how near." Anyone who has ever slain a beastly par five by unsheathing two consecutive shots from the blissful sweet spot of his or her technologically advanced clubs and been rewarded with a twenty foot putt for eagle, only to three-putt for a par, knows this all too well. If golf is a game of equity and fairness, how can the golfing gods possible deem if impartial to count a simple putt of no more than a few feet an equal number of strokes as a 320-yard drive or a 230-yard four iron to within feet of the pin? The answer is that it's not fair and that's what makes the game so popular—it can at times be a strain on our sanity. But it's the scenario of the 230-yard four iron in the example above that I take umbrage with. The debate over distance has been brewing for some time now and the at times wavering battle lines seem to be growing more defined between the course architects and traditionalists versus the players, pundits, and manufacturers.

Without a doubt, the former are in the minority and have even been made to look like raving loons by some advertisements. Equipment and ball manufacturers alike know that appealing to testosterone increases sales. The same research substantiates the vast amount of wealth being invested into and gleaned from NASCAR—the fastest growing sport in the world. But even amidst the onslaught of longer balls and larger clubs, the claim that those who are concerned about the integrity of the game are unrealistic or out of touch is difficult to substantiate with any reasonable amount of common sense. If all architects were in it solely for the money, they would want all restrictions to be systematically whittled away so that every couple of years they would be called back to lengthen their earlier designs! By wanting the USGA to stand up for the integrity of the game, aren't architects actually hurting their opportunities for future renovation and re-design work?

Likewise, if the USGA is not willing to defend the game more so than it has in recent years and courses are made longer and longer (and consequently more expensive), then an argument could be made that a portion of the golfing base will no longer be able to afford to play the game and keep up with the technological advances it demands. At the least, more average golfers will grow increasingly impatient with the difficulty of the game (as increased length typically does not translate into increased accuracy for most golfers) and it's longer courses and turn to other recreational activities. Bad for everyone.

Although both arguments may represent a "slippery Slope" to some degree, the recent compilation of the PGA Tour's final statistics for the 2003 season reveal some very interesting "evidence" to support the claims that equipment is playing an increasingly larger role in the game—although distance doesn't necessarily translate into more money for the professionals. Case in point:: Hank Kuehne led the Tour in 2003 in average driving distance with an eye-popping 321.4 yards! Behind Kuehne were 8 more players who averaged more than 300 yards per drive on the two holes each round that drives are measured on throughout the year. Yes, I said averaged more than 300 yards. Beyond 9<sup>th</sup> place, another 7 players were within one yard of the 300 mark. There's only one thing scarier than the fact that Kuehne's longest measured drive of the season was 385 yards—the fact that it was 15 yards shorter than Per-Ulrik Johansson's first place drive of 400 yards!

For those who are quick to point out that technology isn't ruining the game because scoring averages are only slightly changed from last year, let's compare the 2003 stats with the stats of 1999, when only John Daly averaged more than 300 yards (a measly 305.6 at that) and second place belonged to Chris Couch at a miniscule 295.8. The following season saw Daly still on top at the end of 2000, although with a curiously shorter average of 301.4 and a second place Tiger Woods was only 3.4 yards behind in a year that saw Woods take home the hardware from three of the four Majors. Then again, in 1999 the longest measured drive belonged to Chris Smith at 427 yards!

My argument is not that the technology is making the game easier for the Tour players. These guys are the best in the world and we should expect great shots from them. The real argument is quite the opposite: ridiculously longer drives and ball flights make existing courses obsolete for all players and the average player still isn't hitting the fairway. For instance, instead of being 260 yards away in the right rough, Joe Golfer is now 290 yards away in the right ear of the guy mowing his yard two streets over. This is not to say, however, that technology isn't adversely impacting the game at the upper tier either.

But for those of us slugging out at the local club or muni, the search for the magic elixir of distance can become consuming. As Mr. Penick knew all too well, scoring is not derived from distance. Even the scoring average for the guys on the Tour this year was only slightly lower (.09 strokes) than in 2001 (maybe everyone needs to work on their short game). Yet we have all played with someone who caught a drive in the sweet spot (or the screws as we used to say in the days of wooden "woods") and exclaimed that he hit that one like Tiger. One problem: Tiger was T-11 on the Tour's driving distance average in 2003. But when was the last time you heard someone drain a seven footer for par and say, "Man, I rolled it like John Huston."

Before I get barraged with e-mail again from those who say I'm blaming ball and club manufacturers, I don't blame solely the manufacturing companies, per se. They are in this game for a profit, have a fiduciary duty to their stockholders, and (supposedly) only go as far as the USGA will let them. But I do think the USGA needs to closely scrutinize its own means which it justifies by way of its goal to grow the game. So the story remains the same and little changes—relatively speaking. And for every pundit who says that technological advances are being blown out of proportion, where are they on the weekends when Tour players are hitting 6-irons into 215 yard par threes. No one in their right mind can make a plausible argument that such feats are merely the result of better conditioning, although it may play some minor part. Such monstrous efforts have to be a direct effect of the balls and/or clubs. So much has been made of testing COR on drivers; however, I would be curious to see a few of those 6-irons go through a lie and loft machine to see which is stronger: the players or the loft on the irons?

*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](http://www.lipouts.com) and let him know. Copyright 2003.*