

Square Pegs and Round Holes

By: Nathan Grace Date: April 25, 2007

Unless you've been under a rock lately, you by now have heard about the newest movement in driver design. Some call it maximizing clubhead size, some say it's the new geometry of the game, but the end result is a new series of drivers from most of the top manufacturers that are square. The drivers, not the manufacturers—more or less. Nike and Callaway are the first to come to mind. Who was first with the idea? It depends on who you ask and I cannot say with complete certainty who it was, so I will not speculate here. But they both have square drivers on the market and apparently, the Nike SUMO brand is the top selling new driver brand on the market today according to survey data, statistical research, and Nike's ads.

So what about the other players in the driver game? There are some such as Titleist who have opted for another geometric design which is more of a conical triangle than a square. It almost resembles more of a wing on the back of the club at address; however, you have to give credit to Titleist for making a bold move. Nike and Callaway are no strangers to mixing things up by taking a different road. However, Titleist is a company (built around a line of golf balls) who loves the classic pear shape of its drivers—even if they do max them out to 460cc. So to make the leap shows me that there is more to this shift in geometry than just a simple marketing ploy.

Enter TaylorMade. Maker of the top-selling drivers of all time, TaylorMade has not jumped over to the square side of the geometric debate—opting instead to take the completely opposite stance of dismissing the new trend as essentially nothing. In fact, just a few months ago, TaylorMade CEO Mark King stated to *GolfWorld* that square drivers would be dead in three months, calling them a “90-day phenomenon.” Oops. Not only was that a little premature and may make him look less credible in the industry, it also forces his company into an odd position. Of course, we all know what he really meant. He was just blowing off the new geometry as inferior because of his company's dominance of the market. Or was he caught off guard because TaylorMade had no square, triangular, or trapezoidal driver on the drawing board? Were they beaten to market so badly that he had to dismiss the notion of a shift in technology design so they wouldn't look like they missed the boat completely? I don't know. Only he knows. What I do know is that it puts TaylorMade in an awkward spot when and if they do jump into the geometry game.

What may help Mr. King is that the world's number one player had yet to put the new geometry into play—at least not officially. Then a funny thing happened on the way to the US Open when Tiger Woods showed up at Oakmont the other day for a test run of the host track. He reportedly reached into his bag, pulled out a Nike SUMO2 driver, and ripped off a 330-yard drive down the middle of the fairway. A place Tiger would probably admit he hasn't seen much of the past year or so. When will we see Tiger playing Nike's square driver in a tournament? No one knows except Tiger. He will play it when he sees fit. And when he does, you can rest assured that the marketing juggernaut that is Nike will make sure you see it and hear about it time and time again. That's part of what makes them so good at their game.

Personally, I don't have a square driver, though I have hit a couple of them. At times, I still miss the days of the PowerBilt Citation persimmon driver and the familiar “thwack” of a drive off the clubface. I long ago put away the Citation woods that I played with for years as a junior. Clubs have to be made for the masses these days to maintain market share and the masses demand forgiveness and new geometry. That's not to say PowerBilt may not see a resurgence if they can produce a square persimmon driver, maybe with a hole in the middle to disperse the weight to the heel and toe? Imagine a wooden doughnut on the end of a stick....then again, maybe not.

Nathan Grace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Association of America whose freelance “Lipouts” column appears in a number of regional and national golf publications. If you would like to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com. Copyright 2007.