

The Elephant in the Room

By: Nathan Crace Date: July 21, 2005

I've noticed something strange in the golf industry lately and I'll be willing to bet I'm not the only one—even if no one is talking about it. For years the debate has grown more “enlightened” over the advancements in technology and how they have damaged the game. Some say the technology is better for the game because more forgiving drivers and hotter golf balls make the game more fun, bringing more people to the game, which, in turn, creates more “core golfers” who comprise the vast majority of spending and financial support for the industry—if not the game itself. So we sit back and watch the tide of enforcement from the USGA ebb and flow while the wave of technology rises higher and higher.

But what seems to be happening without anyone mentioning it is the growing exodus of golfers (amateurs and professionals alike) away from the old standards and toward the new players in the equipment game. For example, whom do you know, besides Pádraig Harrington, who still plays with a Wilson anything—let alone an entire set? Yet for years, companies like Wilson and Spalding were mainstays in golf equipment. There was a time when you couldn't find a better driver or fairway wood (note to commentators: please stop calling them “fairway metals”) than a Powerbilt Citation—if you wanted persimmon. I myself, have four or five that I love and they make great additions to the “old clubs home” I have converted an old staff bag into in my garage. In 2005, there seem to be more hybrid club makers in the market than Starbucks stores in Manhattan and a lot of you have them in your bags right now. And just this year, the “big name” manufacturers have really caught on and decided to enter the hybrid fray. This may explain why Nickent led the field in hybrids in recent Nationwide Tour events. Only time will tell if this holds up.

Through all of this, one company has remained a constant. The same company which has won the Masters, the U.S. Open, the British Open, and the PGA Championship and countless other women's majors and amateur events so many times I can't even find a number in my research to include in this column. This is, of course, the self-proclaimed (and the statistics seem to support it) “Number 1 Ball in Golf” Titleist. It seems like any ball with the famous Titleist logo on it sells and further increases Acushnet's market share. But if you look closely, this too may be changing beneath our very noses and I wonder if the folks in Fairhaven, Massachusetts are concerned yet. Could this be the elephant in the very boardroom of Titleist? No question about it, they dominate the ball market. But large changes start with small steps and even the elephant in the room has to be eaten one bite at a time.

I took the opportunity to visit last year's Southern Farm Bureau Classic in Madison, Mississippi with a friend of mine and his son. Bear in mind, this is the first time I had visited a PGA Tour event since I followed John Daly in the 1991 PGA Championship at Crooked Stick in Carmel, Indiana and eventually fell asleep under the scoreboard to the right of the 18th fairway and missed his march up the 72nd hole...but that's a story for another column. One thing I began noticing up and down the fairways of Annandale (of which Fred Funk did not many that week) were a *lot* of Nike golf shoes and more Nike staff bags than I would have thought. Like Titleist, FootJoy (a sister brand under the Acushnet banner) dominates the footwear count on Tour, but having recently acquired a pair of Nike golf shoes myself, I caught myself noticing more and more of them on players' feet. Sort of like the phenomenon whereas you purchase a particular model of car and suddenly you notice them all over the place when you're driving around town. Everyone knows about the high profile players who have signed on with Nike such as Justin Leonard, KJ Choi, Stewart Cink, and of course Tiger Woods. But my extremely unscientific method of data gathering seemed to indicate that more and more guys like Paul Azinger and Rich Beem and others were wearing Nike footwear—even some guys who didn't appear to be on staff because nothing else they had bore the familiar Nike logo.

Back to 1991: another player I followed that weekend in the Hoosier State was Nick Faldo. He was undoubtedly the dominant player in golf in the late 80's and early 90's and he stood out among the other players—literally standing head and shoulders above many others in the field because of his height. So I watched him methodically make his way around the Pete Dye design for a few holes. Then this past weekend, I noticed the former champion-turned commentator playing well in the British Open adorned in, to my surprise, Nike paraphernalia from head to toe and across his bag as well! Nick Faldo? Playing what Mickelson just two years ago had referred to as “inferior equipment?” Interesting.

Of course, Mickelson is now a Callaway guy—another entrant into the golf ball fray along with Japanese magnate Bridgestone and other also-rans. But as more and more high profile players start playing different balls and the public knows about it, more golfers will be willing to try them out. However, if they don't like the test run, you can “forgetaboutit!” We golfers are a finicky bunch. But even one of the top players in the world who played for the US Ryder Cup team in 2004, when asked about the possible problems of playing alternate shot with Tiger since he plays a Nike ball and most of the others played a Titleist ball, was quoted as saying it wouldn't bother him much because he had hit all of them on the range and he couldn't tell the difference! What? Out of fear for the player's safety, the blasphemer's name is being withheld in this article.

And so, it seems, that like every other part of a capitalistic society, the golf equipment industry is changing and adapting to new technology, the demands of the consumer, and better and better marketing techniques. I myself am stuck somewhere in the middle. Not that anyone cares, but I play Titleist irons and balls, have a Ping putter (the same one in my bag for 15+ years), a Taylor Made driver, and Titleist's 2004 edition USA carry bag. But you will have to pry my Nike golf shoes off of my cold dead feet or go buy your own pair—they are that comfortable. And although a paradigm shift of the dominant player in the golf ball game may not be eminent or even plausible, it would appear that an elephant has made his way into a distant corner of the room—and he may very well have a big “swoosh” tattooed on his....side.

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 2005.