

One Ball on Tour?

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There is no doubt the way Golf is being played has changed. When Tiger first appeared on the scene in 1996, he was carrying the ball 270 yards off the tee, which was largely taking the trouble out of contention on most courses. Now players are carrying hybrids that far.

The USGA and the R&A have recently released their "Distance Insights Project," which revealed that Tour Players are now hitting the ball on average a further 30 yards than they were just 25 years ago. This is of course being due to the advancement in equipment Technology, equipment rules, and increased strength and conditioning science that most players now commit to.

It is human nature to want to run faster and jump higher, so improved athleticism and training has to be embraced, especially for golf, which up until recent times lagged in terms of physical conditioning compared to most other professional sports.

The consensus is that equipment is the issue and rules may need to change for the Professional game.

Distance, of course, is not everything. Bryson DeChambeau proved this at the recent Masters where despite all the hype leading up to Augusta, he was unable to overpower the layout. I think for a lot of people, specifically governing bodies, this was a huge relief. However, Championship courses are now facing a dilemma on how to protect their layouts, while maintaining the integrity of the original course design. Properties are essentially running out of room to be able to design courses that are 8000 yards from the back tees, not to mention the increased costs involved.

So just how realistic would it be to standardise equipment on Tour?

The first big obstacle I see will be getting around the multimillion-dollar equipment endorsements every player has. The bottom line for these deals is to sell more equipment, and if the likes of Dustin Johnson is playing different equipment to what's on our shelves, how does he genuinely endorse this product to us?

Is it even feasible to introduce, for example, one conforming ball on tour? Given the vastness of players who employ different balls according to swing speeds and game types, do we actually want this as fans?

The one thing that separates our game is the unique and individual ways of getting the ball in the hole in the fewest shots. This is an art form, and to lose it I believe would be a mistake.

Fast forward 20 years.

The average driving distance on tour is now 400 yards. Fairways look like minefields littered with deep bunkers and fairways are tight narrow corridors lined with towering trees. The rough is so imposing that to even slightly stray offline in the first cut means an automatic hack back out onto the fairway.

Or...

The USGA and the R&A in 2021 decide to impose strict equipment regulations. One tournament ball has been introduced and is capped at travelling 300 yards regardless of swing speed. Ball trajectory and spin rates are now uniformly the same player to player, and the artistry of the game is a distant memory from the likes of Seve Ballesteros and Phil Mickelson.

Perhaps there is a middle ground to these scenarios?

Ball technology over the last decade has been extraordinary, so possibly a ball can be developed to still encapsulate the traditional characteristics of a player's individual choice, such as compression, spin rate and ball flight, but have some type of distance limitation. Longer hitters will still be longer, but courses could prepare championship layouts with more accuracy without completely neutralising the artistry of the game.