

At this year's Caltex Singapore Masters, Frankie Minoza set a new course record of 61 at SICC's Bukit Course while Annika Sorenstam shot a 59 last March in Arizona, USA.

Has par lost its meaning and basis?

Does technology render many courses defenseless?

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In Defense of PAR

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Bonari Kogen Golf Club,
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*Grand Shanghai Golf Club,
China*

Have you noticed? There is an ongoing and irreversible series of changes sweeping the golf industry. There is no comparable period going back to the dim emergence of golf as a sport rather than a shepherd's past time some 400 years ago.

The driving forces for this change are genetics and nutrition, visual exposure, the media, teaching methods and technology. In the span of the past 10 years, what has been accepted as standard is no longer standard. What has been adequate, acceptable and expected for decades on the golf course is no longer.

The changes I refer to are related to the revolution of golf equipment technology as evidenced by carbon graphite, Kevlar and other exotic new shaft materials, new metal woods of unique design and diverse size, point of impact sweet spot positioning, tungsten, titanium, and other alloy metals, new irons of diverse loft designed for specialized use and more ball control, exotic and sometimes better putters, improving grip style and materials, along with continuing elaboration upon the outward appearance and inward construction of golf balls. These are not the same tools Byron Nelson or Ben Hogan used a generation or two ago.

These technological changes, more or less blessed by the USGA and The Royal and Ancient Club of Scotland provide the average and even beginning golfers with the hope of longer drives, fewer slices, shorter, more precise approach shots, easier relief from bunkers or rough and truer putts. In the professional ranks, one only need review the average scores or winning scores at major and weekly tournaments

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to note the downward progression of scores. Certainly scores have progressively receded from the 1920s era. But, until the technological stampede of recent years, the downward trend was gradual. An Open victory with an above par score was the norm in the teens and twenties.

The Impact of Technology

Improved technology alone translates into improved play, in greater or lesser amounts, for professional, average and perhaps the beginner, too. In the past 10 years, the average drive recorded at professional tournaments has increased by around 20 to 25 yards (18 to 22 meters), for "average" PGA pros to the 285-290 yards (260-265 meters) range. The exceptions, Tiger Woods, John Daly, average 300 yards or more without pressing.

On the LPGA tour, lengths undreamed of by average male players a generation ago now are common. Karrie Webb averages 258 yards (236 meters) off the tee and she is not the longest driver. Many par 5s now are par 4.5s due to length improvements with driver and long irons. Average

club players can see longer, if not always straighter, drives and longer, crisper second shots. Nonetheless, putting remains a mental game, generally beyond real technological help. Two putts are still something to be thankful for. However, many TV commentators try to make 20-foot (6 meter) putts appear automatic and normal.

For the pros, global positioning survey equipment produces cards of the course that give distances down to the nearest foot (30 cm). Many courses today have distance measurement books on sale in the pro shop. Sprinkler head measurements to the green, or distance stakes or markers on the cart path remove the need for skill and judgment in club selection and the amount of a club to apply to the ball.

Maintenance Considerations

In part, improved play also must be credited to improvements in turfgrass varietal breeding programs and golf course maintenance. Having more university trained golf course superintendents is an important factor. Turfgrass equipment manufacturers also have impacted play dramatically with sophisticated technological advances. Today, precision mowing equipment cuts genetically manipulated turfgrass varieties with finer leaf textures and more upright growth fed by exotic fertilizer blends and protected from the scourges of pests and disease by modern chemistry. Sophisticated irrigation systems eliminate bare spots, soggy spots, unwatered roughs and thin, droughty fairways.

Fairways today are often comparable to green surfaces of 20 years ago. Putting surfaces often resemble pool tables now, nearly flawless and consistently mowed to 1/8th inch (3 mm) or even 3/32nd inch (2.5 mm) rather than 3/16th or 1/4th inch. Stimpmeter green speeds of 10 or more are becoming the expectation. Even the roughs provided today are often comparable to fairways of a decade ago. Deep, thick roughs promoted at major tournaments do not intimidate the pro player. Shallower bunkers are easier to play out of than rough. Better turfgrass surfaces clearly improve the play of the ball, and longer successful putts have been a result.

Improved equipment helps the golfer exploit these luxuriant turf conditions.

Tiger Woods is a one-of-a-kind situation. There may be some other Tigers around in the years to come. If not, at least near Tiger clones are on the way. The golfers of today's youth are nutritionally healthier and genetically bigger and stronger. Combined with increased physical well-being, ample exposure to golf lessons, televised tournaments, how-to magazine articles, videos of Tiger's swing, hours on the practice range and considerable playing time and anybody's game would improve. Your father did not have these assets to exploit and the difference in general in playing ability is apparent.

Better equipment, better turf, stronger players, better players - what is the golf course owner, operator, manager and golf superintendent to do? I believe that too little attention to the implications of these changes has been devoted to the full impending impact.

All of these converging factors of game improvement are creating a very serious and long-term problem of major proportion. Every existing golf course is being reduced in playing challenge and playing strategy as the typical drive



becomes longer. The game loses designed-in playing character that will lessen the enjoyment of the meaningful traditions of golf for pro and every other golfer as technology compresses every golf course.

There are now over 60 million golfers worldwide. There are nearly 17,000 golf courses within the United States, and an additional 10,000 more around the world. The rapid and

recent advancements in technology and accompanying potential for longer drives and shorter approach shots have reduced the playing challenge and par value of almost all of these courses. Technology has shortened courses, made second shots easier, putts truer. Seven thousand yards (6,400 meters) is no longer considered a long course. For the women, 6,300 is now more appropriate for a pro event than 6,000 or 6,100 yards. Par 4s are now Par 3.7. Par 5s are par 4.5. Par 70 or 72 is invalid. Sub par rounds become par and tournament wins at 15 under or more are expected, not the exception, even for the "majors."

"Par" is the score that an expert golfer would be expected to make for a given hole. Par means errorless play without flukes and under ordinary weather conditions, allowing two strokes on the putting green. (Definition from the U.S.G.A. Handbook).

I would consider professional players expert golfers. It is not only Tiger Woods or Karrie Webb who shatter par on a day-by-day and tournament basis. Sub-par rounds and sub-par tournament totals are routinely made these days by the women of the LPGA. When significantly sub-par rounds are posted by any but the most exceptional of players, it is difficult to credit the increased ability to luck or skill when the technologically enhanced equipment is considered.

Let's be honest, not all these players are becoming better with age. Can a comparison be drawn between performance enhancing drug use in athletics, football and baseball and pure technological stimulants provided by metallurgical and aerodynamic sciences? The outcome is a public perception that anything less than serious sub-par numbers equates with inferior golf. All the while, the definition and the traditional meaning of par is diminished. Even the senior tour is showing double-digit scores below par by the second day. When these players were on the regular tour 20 or 25 years ago, double digit, below par, winning scores were infrequent and almost exceptional.

The U.S.G.A. definition of Par is no longer valid. The traditional standards of golf, hole length, par and winning scores are becoming compacted, reduced and sacrificed. Average pros on the tour win their one and only tournament by sub par scores once only dreamed of. Tiger wins by scores that even he should not win by. Modern technology has distorted the fact that as originally conceived golf was never meant to be easy. Now, at least at the professional level, it is.

For the country club, daily fee, municipal or resort

course, the situation is critical. With everyone hitting the ball farther, or at least trying to, most golf courses today are too short, too undefended, too open to exploitation and opportunism that is beyond the original intent of the design. The original playing challenge is mitigated or muted. Once challenging courses are becoming boring. Par should still remain the benchmark of play, and not become an insignificant number golfers assume is to be violated with regularity and abandon.

In fact, many low scores today result not from the superior ability or unsurpassed talent and vigor of the player. Too many sub par rounds emerge because the golf course has become defenseless, outgunned more by modern technology, not every players newly found length or accuracy.

How far can this go? No serious effort appears on the horizon from the ruling authorities to temper the advance of technology. Too much profit and too many lawyers bar the way. Golfers, spectators and the media seem to be impressed with sub par rounds. The long and historic tradition of golf is raped and pillaged and there are few complaints or protests. Even Augusta National and The Old Course have made faint design-related efforts to stem the assault upon par. Better late than never!

Course design considerations

This diminishment of the value of par really is a serious problem. To counteract the technological onslaught requires amounts of money for remodeling and redesign most courses do not have, or can only wish for. There must be counter action, sooner rather than later, unless the general golfing public and the public relations and marketing types begin to sell the idea that a round of 60 is normal, to be admired and perhaps emulated by buying the most recent, really, really big driver or the newest solid core, non-wound ball.

Rebuilding a course to lengthen tees, reposition fairway bunkers or add bunkering and create a new more contoured and demanding putting surface is not inexpensive. Consider one million dollars or more per 18-hole course to "Tigerize" the layout to provide an improved defense against too easy sub-par; multiply by 17,000 courses currently existing. Add up the total. The money is not there. Rebuilding every course to counteract technology is impossible.

Aside from the technological dumbing down of par, "bunker creep" and "green creep", the insidious step-by-step evolutionary turfgrass and tree growth changes that impact every golf course, contribute in part to the decimation of

par. Smaller, rounder, shallower, less demanding bunkers and round, flat, boring and unchallenging greensites render defenseless many older courses. Flat, luxuriant fairways and timid roughs soften the game. Too good, very expensive, maintenance expectations also contribute. There is no reason why every course should try to emulate Augusta National in maintenance quality. Ever increasing maintenance expectations have caused an escalation in maintenance costs, to about an average of \$635,000 per 18 holes in the United States. Higher maintenance costs help raise the cost of playing while diminishing par. Technology, evolution and their related cousins: physical ability, mentality, mental attitude and smoother grass can and must be addressed at some point.

It is not inexpensive, quick, easy or convenient, yet, remodeling, upgrading and repositioning of existing courses will provide the opportunity to defend against a good portion of the onslaught from the technological age. Perhaps, just perhaps, the powers that be in Far Hills and St. Andrews will make a stand. If technological advances continue unabated, within five years all courses over 10 years of age will be too short, and almost defenseless.

In order to counteract the impact of technology and to defend the value of par, hole lengths, course lengths, fairway bunkers or other hazard locations and sizes, fairway widths, greensite configurations, green surface sizes, bunker sizes, orientation and basin depths must all be reevaluated. These changes are not only to combat professional play. Average players - mid-teens handicaps and below (in the United States) benefit from the improved technology. Average players elsewhere also will experience some degree of benefit that technology offers. Teeing area repositioning and the number of tee positions offered must be reconsidered. More teeing area diversity is needed. For courses designed 15 or 20 or more years ago, the fairway bunkers were typically positioned at 220, 230 (200, 210

meters) or perhaps 250 yards (228 meters), more or less, off the back tee. PGA tour pro average drives in those days were 250-260 yards (228-237 meters) or so. The correctly positioned bunkers at least had to be thought about by the player before the shot was taken.

Today, many club players can fly bunkers at 240 or 250 yards (220-228 meters), particularly if they play not from the back but from mid tees. Fairway bunkers should serve a purpose or they should not be there at all. Now, the better women players drive into bunkers that were once set to be beyond their range. Much of the challenge and fairness of the tee shot is lost. Designed-in forced carry water hazard placements are now often incorrectly positioned and less effective.

The widening diversity of playing ages and abilities mandates more and more diverse teeing positions. Common long drives render tame the once-feared 7,000-yard (6,400 meter) course. Today 7,300 yards may not be considered long for very much longer. In a few years, the way technology is going, 7,500-yard tournament course may be a design objective. Shorter front tees are also necessary to accommodate junior and



very senior players.

On existing courses, ever smaller bunkers, due to creep, an expansion of the distance between greenside bunker and pin placement and too short tees all contribute to an undue and unearned assault on par. Too many courses today, certainly many that pay dearly for the honor and prestige of hosting a professional tournament or made-for-TV skins game, due to original design characteristics, are not really up to the task. Looking lush and green can still also produce a defenseless track, not one really able to provide a reasonable defense upon the assault of par.

Not every course today has extra land available where tee length can be added. It will not be long before 7,300 yards is looked at as normal for a "championship" course. It may be impossible to "Tigerize" every course. Mr. Woods can hit the ball farther than land exists. For others, at least

repositioning tees, lengthening when possible, removing too short bunkers and repositioning other bunkers, adding mounds or sloped contours to test and perhaps even trap the 280 or 290 yard (256 or 265 meter) drive is a partial defense. We may soon have to consider the pro's 300 or 310 yard (274 or 283 meter) drive average. Bunkers need to be large enough and deep enough to be physiological and physical hazards, as traditional historic Scottish bunkers were. Water hazards are harder to modernize. However, position of tee shot and insertion of the water strategically into play off the tee or at the greensite can help provide defense.

Shifting greensites within an existing course is not always possible. Rebuilding to replace the green creep induced small, round and flat surface with a contoured, sculptured multi-level, multi-pin position greensite is possible. Designing new greensites where adjacent bunkers are tight and meaningful will help. Creating bunkers whose depth is measured in feet, not inches, can help. Reemphasizing strategic shot values, not just the power drives, can be defensive. Fast contoured putting surfaces, as Augusta has shown, can compensate for the inadequacy of fairway sand bunkering.

Remodeling, upgrading and repositioning of existing courses will become more common as the impact and effect of "average" club players' 250 or 260 yard (228 or 237 meter) drives and shorter approach shots expands. Par has value and must not be void of meaning if the traditions of golf are to remain intact.

Alternative approach

Consider if you will, a new valuation system for par at least for pro tournaments. Move Par 3 to 275 or 280 yards (251 or 256 meters). Make Par 4 extend to 510 or 520 yards (466 or 475 meters). From the tournament tees or club back tees, a course once 72 might even now be Par 70. A reconsideration of the current rating system would reflect lengths and distances undreamed of 20 years ago. On new courses, 72 could be easily retained. At some locations, adjusted tee lengths for average players, seniors or the family front tees



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can more easily be adjusted than redoing all the greensites.

Eliminating global positioning systems (GPS) and other measured course guides, if only for tournaments, would force players to judge distance. This would have an immediate effect. If technology advances too much further, it may become desirable to add a few grams to the allowed weight of a ball. The last resort is to reduce the diameter of the cup by one half inch (12.5 mm) at least for professional tournaments.

It is certain, that as technological advances continue, the playing quality of the average course will decline. Par will become irrelevant or petty at best. There is an inverse relationship between the advances in technology and the challenge and playability of a golf course. How many golfers really want to play on a dumb, simple, boring and easy courses just to score well? Easy pars remove the challenge and ambition that is the true essence of golf. Something must be done to reestablish the relationship of par to ability and accomplishment. A continued disparity in the relationship of par to winning scores will only further reduce the value of a score, cheapen a win and insult the traditions of golf.

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