

Golf equipment evolves in every realm

BY Nick Clark \* SUN NEWSPAPERS  
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It's an old theory, but one that still challenges the sharpest of minds.

How do you fit a square peg into a round hole?

Well, deep inside a small grey building just outside the Dallas/Fort Worth area at Nike's Research and Design facility, a gathering of golf's greatest, and most innovative minds are trying to solve that lifelong quest.

Only their square peg is countless attempts - some successful, some not - at new golf club designs, and their hole is a set of guidelines set up by the United States Golf Association.

That's right. Contrary to some beliefs, and the look and feel to some modern day golf clubs, there are restrictions to what a golf club can be.

"There are limitations," said Bob Lucas, who works at Sundance Golf Club in Dayton repairing and fitting golf clubs. "Now they are going to have to find other ways of tweaking it, and they will. They always do."

That much is obvious by the driver that hit the market out of that grey building, known to insiders as The Oven, earlier this year. From just above the clubhead, it looks nothing like most drivers on the market today.

The biggest difference: its clubhead is square, something that's never been done before.

"It's that way, because they could fit the highest amount of cc's (cubic centimeters) in the head," said Matt Just, a teaching professional at Sundance and with ESPN golf schools.

"With the square drivers, what they are trying to achieve now is a high moment of inertia, so there is less twisting at impact with the face of the club. That is just the geometry behind the design. The square moves the weighting on the outside, so there is no twisting."

Confused? You're not alone. But this is the type of thinking that has forever changed the sport.

Woods are no longer made of wood, a 5-iron today wasn't a 5-iron 20 years ago and a 450-yard, par-4 isn't nearly as threatening as it once was.



The evolution of the driver: From the 1960 McGregor (background) to the New Nike square headed driver (foreground), the club has gone through some serious changes over the years. (NICK CLARK - SUN NEWSPAPERS)

Evolution in the equipment has changed the way golf is played at every level. From the tour pros like Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson, to the first-timers making their way to the No. 1 tee at Sundance this past June, everybody feels like they have a chance because of what has happened with the tools.

"It's tough to blame the club anymore for hitting a bad shot," Lucas said, "because the clubs that are out there today don't really make mistakes if they are used right."

Neither do the balls they are hitting. Of all the noticeable changes in golf equipment over the years, it's the unnoticeable factor that some say has had the most affect on the today's game.

"To me [the ball] changed the game more than any single piece of equipment, maybe since the sand wedge in the 1930's," said Don Berry, head golf professional at Edinburgh USA in Brooklyn Park. "When Titleist came out with the Pro V1, I remember that year the driving distance on the tour went up like 12 yards in a year, and it had only gone up 12 yards in 50 years prior to that. They took the spin out of it. It doesn't slice or hook, it just goes farther."

To do that, all that had to be done was simplify the way the ball was constructed. Balls used to be made with an inner core, bands wrapped around that core, and an outer cover.

Now, in most cases, just two pieces make up a golf ball: that inner core and an outer cover. The outer core has undergone some serious changes, giving each brand of golf ball a distinct feel to it.

"It has the same construction, it's a two-piece ball," Berry said. "The difference between

[the Pro V1] to like a Top-Flite or a Pinnacle is how much softer the cover is and the aerodynamics of it. You still have a softer feel, and you get more spin [on the greens]."

Those changes, coupled with enlarged drivers and irons that hit a full club longer than 20 years ago, have made getting to the green easier.

On it, the goal is still the same: get the ball in the hole. But the putter being used to do that has also gone through a serious overhaul as well.

"They have gotten bigger," Berry said. "Other than the driver, the putter has probably gotten the biggest. And it is all a stability issue as far as having a stable head at impact, perimeter weighting so you can hit it on the toe or the heel and not lose the roll."

Some putters look like drivers, but even the ones that resemble those that Jack Nicklaus used in racking up 18 major wins have changed.

"They are balanced differently," Berry said. "Based on a lot on players' preference and how their stroke is."

And how much they want to pay. Putters, like every club in the bag, vary dramatically in price, and like most of the equipment, the more you are willing to pay, the better the equipment.

But can the average Joe afford to pay for that balance in the putter, or the square driver, or the Pro V1's, or the \$1,000 set of irons, which could total \$2,000 for a bag filled of top-of-the-line gear.

Well, that's a matter of commitment, Lucas said.

"If a guy wants to improve and wants to spend some time on it, that's not that much [money], I don't think," he said. "If a guy just wants to go out and have some entertainment, then you can go out and spend \$600 and get a decent set of clubs and you'll be able to get yourself around, but if you really wanted to spend some time, or really want to play, it is probably a good idea to go into a good pro-line club, and not take your chances, because some of this off the shelf stuff, you don't know what they are. You want to have something that you can depend on."