**In the long run, the long ball has been a problem for golf**

By [Doug Robinson, Columnist](https://www.deseret.com/authors/doug-robinson)  Jul 28, 2020, 1:50pm MDT

SALT LAKE CITY — The overseers of golf are doing their best Bud Selig impersonation. They have fallen asleep at the wheel while their sport continues to chart a problematic path, and now golf legend Jack Nicklaus has called them out for failing to address a long-standing issue in the game: The increasing length of drives.

“The USGA and the R&A have got to wake up sooner or later,” Nicklaus said after being asked about the issue by Nick Faldo during the Golf Channel’s coverage of the Memorial Tournament. “They can’t just keep burying their heads on this. They see it, they watch television, they see where these guys hit the golf ball. It isn’t about how far they hit it. You just can’t keep making golf courses longer. You just don’t have enough land, you don’t have enough money to do it.”

As if to prove Nicklaus’ point, that day Bryson DeChambeau hit drives of 374 yards, 353 yards, 362 yards, 406 yards and a monstrous 423-yard blast, which left him just 45 yards from the hole, a par-4. He carded a birdie.

Pro golfers are outgrowing PGA Tour courses, which have responded by repeatedly adding more length. In 1999, Augusta National — the temple of golf — lengthened two holes. In 2002, Augusta lengthened nine holes, adding 285 yards. In 2006, six holes were lengthened, including some of those that had been lengthened in 2002. For 2020, the tee box on the fifth hole was pushed back 40 yards.

Report ad

Aficionados of the game argue that it’s ruining golf. Brute strength is replacing finesse, strategy and skill.

In 1980, Dan Pohl led the tour in average driving distance, at 274.3 yards; in 1999, John Daly led the tour at 301 yards (four yards shy of his record mark the previous year). In 2020, DeChambeau is averaging 323 yards. The overall tour averages in those 20-year increments: 256.9 in 1980, 272.2 in 2000, and 296.4 in 2020.

Every generation seems to produce a long-ball hitter who pushes the limits of the game and prompts concerns about the game’s future — Nicklaus, Tiger Woods, Daly, and DeChambeau, to name some.

“I’ve been preaching about it for, goodness gracious … 43 years (ago) I first went to the USGA,” Nicklaus said. “I mean, that’s a long time to be studying something. Guys, stop studying it and do something! Will you, please?”

The latest study was commissioned by the USGA and the R&A (Royal and Ancient Golf Club). The results of the so-called Distance Insights Report were released in February and were based on the examination of 100 years of data about the impact of increased hitting distance on the game. Among the conclusions:

• “There is a 100-year trend of hitting distance increases ... and a corresponding increase in the length of golf courses … this continuing cycle is detrimental to the game’s long-term future.”

• “The inherent strategic challenge presented by many golf courses can be compromised, especially when those courses have not or cannot become long enough to keep up with the increases in the hitting distances … This can lead to a risk of many courses becoming less challenging or obsolete.”

• “Increased hitting distance can … undermine the core principle that the challenge of golf is about needing to demonstrate a broad range of skills.”

In its conclusions, the report states, “We believe that golf will best thrive over the next decades and beyond if this continuing cycle of ever-increasing hitting distances and golf course lengths is brought to an end.”

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The increased driving distances can be attributed to ever-evolving club technology, the increased athleticism of the players and the strength-training regimens undertaken by players (DeChambeau reportedly added 10 pounds of muscle for 2020 and Brooks Koepka and Tiger Woods, among others, are avid weight lifters). But the main culprit is believed to be the ball, which has been engineered to fly farther and farther. Some have advocated reducing its flight by 20%. Others fear that this might not play well with fans — who want to see professionals hit only 250 yards, the same distance as weekend golfers?

Baseball has the same issue. Fans dig the long ball, on the golf course or the diamond. Unlike golf, Major League Baseball was at least forward-thinking enough not to allow equipment changes such as aluminum bats; otherwise, every stadium in the league would have to expanded. But the majors has been widely accused of adding a livelier ball. The league’s season home run record has been broken two of the last three years. In 2019, there were 6,776 homers. Thirty years earlier, in 1989, there were 3,083.

Pitcher Justin Verlander believes commissioner Rob Manfred ordered juiced baseballs.

“Major League Baseball’s turning this game into a joke,” Verlander said a year ago. “They own Rawlings. … If any other $40 billion company bought out a $400 million company and the product changed dramatically, it’s not a guess as to what happened. ... Manfred, the first time he came in, what’d he say? He said, we want more offense. All of a sudden he comes in, the balls are juiced?”

Baseball has been down this road before. Selig, the commissioner from 1998 to 2015, was either oblivious or looked the other way while steroid-aided sluggers destroyed the record book. It certainly made the game popular.

Now Nicklaus is again sounding the alarm, just as Verlander did and just as Nicklaus did decades ago. Will the PGA Tour act this time