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A Perspective on the Distance Insights Report

By David Maher, President & CEO, Acushnet Company | Feb. 19, 2020

In the recently released Distance Insights Report, The R&A and the USGA concluded that a continuing cycle of increased hitting distance by elite male golfers is undesirable and detrimental to golf's long-term future and is "taking golf in the wrong direction" by reducing the skill needed to play the game at the highest levels.

In the spirit of contributing additional perspective to this discussion and the game's timeless, and healthy, debate between [Tradition and Technology](#), we believe the conclusions drawn in this Report undervalue the skill and athleticism of the game's very best players and focus far too much on the top of the men's professional game and project this on golf and golfers as a whole. Furthermore, we believe that existing equipment regulations effectively govern the prospects of any significant increases in hitting distance by the game's longest hitters.

Like all sports, golf is played differently today than it was centuries, and even decades, ago – from the people who play, the rules by which we play, and the equipment we use. Almost all would agree this progress has been a great benefit to the game and that innovation in golf equipment has been an important contributor to this progress. Golf is bringing younger players into the game sooner and keeping older players longer than ever; professional golf is as dynamic and entertaining as it's ever been; and the game remains a healthy challenge for all players and at all levels.

Since the origins of the game, innovation in equipment has played a critical role in its growth and enjoyment. However, the Report indicates the next step in the Distance Insights Project will focus on evaluating potential changes to the equipment rules to curb innovation and limit any additional hitting distance. Golf equipment (clubs and balls) has historically been highly regulated, and these regulations have been effective in setting upper limits on equipment performance and ensuring that the best golfers separate themselves with their talent, skill, and training while using equipment best suited to their games. The ability to consistently achieve distance with accuracy, and convert this into low scores, remains a special and elusive skill. In fact, the Report itself shows that hitting distance on the PGA Tour decreased in 6 of the past 13 years, including 2019. We believe this helps to affirm the effectiveness of regulatory efforts, particularly those adopted since the early 2000s, which continue to achieve their desired intent of setting boundaries around future distance increases while also rewarding skill and encouraging innovation.

As importantly, the existing equipment regulations allow professional and amateur golfers to play by the same unified set of rules, with the same equipment, and on the same courses. The Report, however, suggests that consideration be given to a “Local Rule option that would specify use of clubs and/or balls intended to result in shorter hitting distances.” We believe that playing by a unified set of rules coalesces our game, is an essential part of its global understanding and appeal, and eliminates the inconsistency and instability that would come from multiple sets of equipment standards. We think it should be preserved for these reasons and those outlined in [the article entitled, *The Case for Unification*](#).

We appreciate that the Distance Insights Project was fueled by the best intentions of The R&A and USGA acting in what they believe to be the game’s best interests. We also recognize that golf is best served when its stakeholders advance and advocate what they understand to be in the best interests of the game. At Acushnet Company, our position is informed by nearly 90 years of manufacturing conforming golf equipment; our close working relationships with the game’s elite professional and amateur players; and our daily interactions with thousands of golfers, PGA Professionals, course operators, and golf retailers everywhere the game is played.

We also appreciate The R&A and USGA’s commitment to the November 2011 Vancouver Protocol and its established processes for the consideration of equipment changes, and we look forward to continuing to work with the game’s stakeholders over the coming months and years to advance the best interests of the game.

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