

Hi-Tech Hits the Fairway



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by Robert Thompson

Golf is a sport steeped in tradition, reluctant to change. The basics of the game haven't changed in decades – at most clubs you'll need a collared shirt, pants and the appropriate footwear. Most golfers carry 14 clubs, a fact which hasn't changed since Gene Sarazen invented the sand wedge and first used it during the 1932 British Open. You might have a titanium-headed driver with eight degrees of loft in your bag, but statistically golfers haven't improved despite the changes in clubs since Sarazen's creation nearly 60 years ago.

But in a game where the past is always present, there has been a slow integration of technology since the mid-1970s. It's hard to imagine Ben Hogan grabbing his cellular phone and his personal digital assistant to keep track of the score, and then jumping in a cart where a global positioning satellite (GPS) monitors the yardage of each shot. Yet that's exactly what happens at courses across North America every day.

European golfers, and especially those from Scotland, the birth place of golf, think carts and electronic gadgets are a ridiculous part of the North American game. But that doesn't mean the influence of technology on the game is slowing. In fact, it's dramatically increasing every year.

In some respects, it's not surprising

it has taken nearly 30 years for technology to find a place in golf.

When carts were first introduced, course owners and operators were hesitant to embrace them. If one played golf, popular opinion was that you walked the course.

It took a number of years for courses to accept carts, though their success is not due to the reasons typically stated. Clearly golf carts don't promote faster play, though that was the initial hope when courses started using them. Rather, carts have proven to be a money-maker for courses, which also accounts for the reason they are

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readily moving towards GPS-based tracking systems.

GPS systems have been around for much of the past decade, but improving technology and an increasingly wired world has sped things up over the past two years. That's the opinion of Doug Lecker, president and chief executive of Tempe, Ariz.-based Prolink, Inc. Now several hundred courses across North America boast GPS trackers on their carts.

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he says. "Now they want to know when they can get it."

Prolink is one of several companies playing in the GPS market. The system costs \$6,000 a month to rent, but it's worthwhile as a way for a course to distinguish itself, Lecker adds. The cost of between \$3 and \$5 is

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usually absorbed by the golfer in slightly higher green fees.

Golfers seem to like the idea that they no longer have to walk to a sprinkler head to check their yardage to the hole. Just park the cart next to the ball and look up at the dash-mounted display. It's as simple as that.

And more advances are coming, Lecker assures. Soon golfers will be able to read e-mail and trade stocks while sitting in their golf carts.

Lecker is not apologetic for the changes his system is bringing to the game. "As much as we'd like to think about this as a traditional game, golf is a business," he says. "And [the GPS system] adds to that business."

And, while you're checking your stock prices on the fifth hole, Craig Schmidt, the founder of Intelligolf, and president of Karrier Communications, the Northern California company that owns Intelligolf, wants to make sure you also track your score on your Palm. As the consumer interest in personal digital assistants spreads, it's not surprising to see them turning up on the golf course. Schmidt developed the concept of Intelligolf, a system that allows you to record your scores and track your

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handicap on a Palm, while playing a round in California.

“We all had our Palms with us, when one of the guys said we should write some software for it to track golf scores,” Schmidt says.


This simple idea turned into big business for Schmidt, who has sold thousand of copies of the program in the past three years. Now golfers can even download course scorecards from the Internet before



heading out on the course.

“For some, it’s part of the game,” Schmidt says.

So, do all of these advances mean golfers are getting lazy and distracted from the game? Well, the short answer is, yes. Clearly fewer people are willing to walk a course, or even walk a few yards to check their distance. More frequently golfers are hopping into a cart, tracking their game by satellite, answering a few calls on a cell phone and recording their score on a hand-held computer.

And all the while, the laughter of the game’s Scottish founders is growing so loud that you can almost hear it in Silicon Valley. 

Robert Thompson is a freelance golf writer based in Toronto, Canada. His work regularly appears on PGATour.com, the official Web site of the PGA golf tour.
