

Golf Insider

By T.J. TOMASI

BIRDIES AND BOGEYS

Really bad idea

Two apparently tone-deaf Florida state politicians, Sen. John Thrasher and Rep. Patrick Rooney, have proposed building a Jack Nicklaus Golf Trail, a string of expensive golf courses in a state that already has more than 1,000 golf courses.

The current budget deficit in Florida is pushing \$3 billion, and cuts are about to be made in all areas. But these two don't get it — golf courses don't make money, Florida already has too many as it is, and the payback on the investment is so long that investing in a golf course should be right next to space travel for tourists.

The new Seve

Seve Ballesteros was never a great ball striker, but he was a great player. He was a natural swinger who came alive when forced to create a shot, i.e., from behind a tree or over a bunker from a bad lie. That's when his swing returned to great.

But on the tee, where no creativity was required, he was mired in mechanics, and his tee shots flew every which way.

Tiger Woods, whose last win was in 2009, is channeling Seve off the tee, and it's only when he gets in trouble that his swing looks good again. In my opinion, his head is filled with Do's and Don'ts. He looks confused, and unless it's a perfect day with no wind, he plays confused.

In the Saturday round at Doral (the Cadillac Championship), Tiger birdied the first hole, then drop-kicked his driver 120 yards off the second tee box, not even making it to the ladies' tees. In the Sunday round, in perfect weather with no wind and nothing on the line, he shot 66 and looked much more mentally relaxed.

Takeaway: Tiger needs to clear the decks, fire all the help and return to being Tiger.

Lightning strikes twice

What are the odds of two holes-in-one made in the same round, one by a man, one by a woman, AND they are playing in the same foursome, AND they are married to each other, AND they have two witnesses?

Joe and Karen Wilkens did exactly that on Feb. 25 at the Woodlands Country Club outside of Houston. Karen made a one on the par-3 11th hole, from 82 yards with a pitching wedge, and three holes later, husband Joe aced the 14th hole using a 7-iron from 131 yards.

IT'S GOOD FOR YOUR GAME

FEEL the REAL release

It's been said many times that in golf "feel and real" are often different, but when it comes to proper hip action, it's "see and real" that often don't match. What you think you see the experts doing and what their hips are actually doing are different.

Most golfers know they must make a hip turn in their swing, but they aren't sure exactly what that means. I've found that focusing on the core area just behind the navel is better than trying to keep track of the hips themselves.

Here is how it works:

On both sides of the core is a hip, which is a ball and socket that rotates when you swing. The key here is that the rotational motion of the hip joint is compromised if the thigh bone (femur) is restricted during your downswing. If you are nailed to your right side, your thigh bone can't release, and therefore, neither can your hips.



While your knee is best known for its ability to bend and straighten, there is also a slight rotational component that you can see here in D.J. Trahan's swing. Through training this movement can be conditioned to nudge the thigh toward the target, thereby releasing the hips so they can fire down the line.

Remember, your body seeks balance, and stacked joints (hip over knee, knee over ankle) are its natural and most powerful condition. Deviations from natural balance must be brief, well-planned and practiced, or else the probabilities that make bad golf a relentless adversary will turn against us.

Note how Trahan's right ankle plays a role in the release of the right thigh, which in turn releases the core. At the finish, the left leg — both the lower and upper leg — are back in alignment.



ABOUT THE WRITER



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TEEING OFF

Master of class

In April, the Masters championship takes place for the 75th time. It started in 1934 at Augusta National Golf Club, a golf course designed by Bobby Jones and Alister Mackenzie. Augusta National represents all that was Jones — elegance, class and attention to detail.

There has never been such a man as Bobby Jones. Intelligent, cultured and literally a legend in his spare time, he played golf on average only three months a year. He retired at 28 after having won the British Amateur, the British Open, the U.S. Open and the U.S. Amateur all in 1930, a feat so unbelievable that it was dubbed the "impregnable quadrilateral."

There are many vignettes that recall the image of the man, but my favorite recounts Jones' unannounced return to St. Andrews after he had retired from competitive golf. He and three friends decided to book a time at the Old Course — no fanfare, no strings pulled, just a name in the starter's book to secure the tee time: R Jones. Just before his time, Jones looked out the clubhouse window and saw a crowd gathering around the first tee. "Isn't it a shame," he remarked, "that we decided to play a casual match during an important championship."

As rumor of his return spread, the town of St. Andrews shut down so all could see the great Jones one more time. Spurred on by his most loyal fans, Jones played inspired golf, hitting perfect shot after perfect shot and prompting a small boy in the crowd to say, "Sir, you are truly a wonder!"

And that he was.

GOLF SPOKEN HERE

Toe hang

A measure of weight moved toward the toe of the putter to promote a stroke that moves on an arc.

ASK THE PRO

Easy does it for most golfers

Q: I hit it good on the range, but when I get out there, I can't hit it very good. What's the best way to change this? — R.H.

A: This is one of the most common questions I get and a difficult one to answer because I don't know your game, but here is a sure-fire way to play better: Play an easier golf course.

Some architects make their golf courses too hard: water everywhere; subtle, wavy breaks on the greens; rough so high you can't see your shoes two steps off the fairway; sand everywhere. And don't believe it when they tell you that the sand isn't really a penalty because it's so easy to play out of.

The best sand player on the PGA Tour last year was Luke Donald, and he got the ball up and down only 66 percent of the time; the LPGA leader was Na Yeon Choi at 67 percent. In reality, each bunker is a potential score wrecker, yet the architects keep piling them on.

The population of golfers has been stuck for quite a while at approximately 26 million, even with the Tiger effect. Why aren't more people golfing? In my opinion, designers are building the courses too hard. They're not fun to play for most golfers, especially beginners. One out of every two women who take up the game quit after 24 months — and so do a lot of men.

So for the good of the game, architects, limit the number of bunkers, flatten the greens, widen the fairways, ban forced carries, cut the rough, and position the water out of the line of fire.

Bottom line: To increase your enjoyment, find a playing field that is user-friendly.

(To Ask the Pro a question about golf, e-mail him at: TJInsider@aol.com.)

THE GOLF DOCTOR

Hitting down lifts the ball up

Many golfers have the wrong concept of how to get the ball in the air. They think they must lift the ball into the air by swinging upward with their hands and arms, an idea that produces a swing that is too vertical, making it almost impossible to hit down on the ball the way they should. The inevitable result is a topped or thin shot.

The reason you have to hit down on the ball to get it in the air is that your clubs are designed with a certain amount of loft built into the clubface, ranging from, say, 11 degrees for your driver to as much as 60 degrees for your lob wedge. The more loft in the clubface, the higher the ball goes.

The key concept is that to "unlock the loft," you have to pinch the ball against the ground with your clubface to take advantage of the club's loft, no matter what club you are hitting. And that means you have to hit down, not up, on the ball.

DON'T MISS IT

Pointed in the right direction

SkyKap LLC is a developer of GPS golf accessories. If you want to go high-tech, this is it: The Advisor

is a wearable audio GPS system that uses a small computer, voice recognition and GPS golf course mapping. The lightweight device clips onto your collar, the golf cart or your hat or visor — quite stylish!

The Advisor responds to your voice and gives distances to greens, bunkers, water, out-of-bounds, etc. The database can hold up to 2,000 golf courses — probably more than you will have time to play!

The Advisor weighs only 2 ounces and costs \$199 at www.skykapllc.com.



GOLF BY THE NUMBERS

Par paid \$100,000 in Honda Classic

For three rounds, the 2011 Honda Classic was, well, a classic. It was played on one of golf's great courses — the Champion Course at PGA National Resort. The wind blew, the bear trap trapped and the pros whined about how hard it was.

Then came Sunday, and to calm all the bruised egos, the tour set up the course so the players could make birdies on TV. It was so easy that one player shot 64. Mid-handicap pin positions turned it into a putting contest, and the result was another boring finish.

Still, it was a battle: In a field of 76 players, 63 (83 percent) were even par or higher. Spencer Levin, Hunter Haas and Charl Schwartzel, who shot par, each made

\$102,600. Ernie Els, in 70th place, shot 16 over par and made \$11,286; Trevor Immelman (a former Masters Champion) finished 73rd (+18) and collected \$11,001 — that's +18!

Match that against the World Golf Championship at Doral, where 38 players broke par and the highest score was +10.

In the battle of the tour teachers at Doral, Butch Harmon won hands down as two of his students, Nick Watney and Dustin Johnson, ended up first and second, respectively, while third-round leader Hunter Mahan, a student of Sean Foley's, faded to ninth, just in front of Tiger Woods, golf's most famous student.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

"When I first started doing golf courses . . . I designed how I thought the game should be played, and I couldn't understand why everyone couldn't carry the ball 280 yards over water. Now I think more about how other people play than how I play."

— Jack Nicklaus

Early in his career, Nicklaus built courses with this attitude and most were no fun to play at all. But as his skills began to fade, he became more sensitive to the plight of the common golfer. Basically, he reached a point where he couldn't play his golf courses either.