

Back to the Future

By Geoff Shackelford

Editor's Note: *AGA past president Jerry Graham was privy to the bowling industry's experience of selling new technology to grow the game while he was a senior executive with Brunswick Corporation. As golf technology advanced through the 90's, Jerry shared his perceptions of bowling and tennis industry practices and how they relate to golf's tech boom and resulting industry decline with Dick Rugge, senior technical director at the USGA.*

In a new book entitled The Future of Golf in America (to be released in April by Sasquatch Books) Geoff Shackelford delves more deeply into the situation. If, as the author suggests, reality in golf parallels tennis and bowling, the game has much to be concerned about. The following are excerpts from the Author's Preface interspersed with commentary from Graham.

Something strange has taken place in golf. The sport of tradition, integrity and artistry has been quietly handed over to business interests, apparently without the slightest concern for the future of golf.

I (Shackelford) will explain how the sport has been overthrown by cutthroat equipment sellers with help from a USGA and a passive PGA Tour that refuse to learn from the demise of tennis. Matters have been made worse by course management companies trying to live up to Wall Street-driven values that have only added expense while subtracting fun and

value from the golfing equation.

Golf has spent the last sixty years subtly expanding and modifying its greatest asset, the course, to accommodate technology and the perception that buying the latest equipment to get a distance boost is the sport's ultimate source of pleasure.

However, our courses are like rubber bands. They have been stretched. The more they expand, the more they narrow. The expense of building and maintenance has added additional price burdens to golfers, without corresponding rewards.

Would baseball redesign its old ballparks and alter the size of the diamond to accommodate a new "hot" baseball?

We do not need to go back to hickory shafts nor discourage innovation of better clubs, particularly if that innovation makes equipment purchases more affordable for more people. But control of golf should not have been handed over to the manufacturers who have little interest – long or short term – in the sport's history, tradition, playing characteristics or future. Their aim is immediate profit.

By now you'd think it should have been apparent that golf's salvation lies not in buying a new driver and playing a "country club for a day," but in the intrinsic richness of the sport itself.

Tennis' mistakes are obvious . . . in retrospect, so are bowling's – both embraced technology and power to grow business, and, as a result, tennis' participation dropped from 34 million to 13 million,

while bowling halved the number of its avid players over the same time period.

When tennis chose power over all-around shotmaking, it killed enthusiasm. The average player could no longer identify with the expert, as the power ingredient was out of his reach – when previously it was the expert's ability to excel at control and strategy that inspired the average player to emulate him. The average golfer can in no way emulate the power of the expert any longer.

And here's the sad part. Tennis didn't even change its courts! They simply changed the way the sport was played . . . We are changing our precious venues for the worse to deal with the power game. Instead of wide, fun, shortish, strategic and forgiving designs that all players can enjoy while still testing better golfers, our courses employ rough, length and other rigging devices to transform gracefully conceived designs into the grounds of discipline that punish balls which have the audacity to stray from the center line.

Graham comments, "Brunswick Corporation understood the game of bowling was being hurt by rapid innovation and consumerism. In response, we insisted on restraining technological advances and supported strong oversight into preservation of the integrity of the game. Better scoring without corresponding improvement in skills only undermines respect for the sport. I have learned from my tenure with the AGA that Golf and golfers are no different. Bowling reacted in time. Tennis has not. Golf? – We'll wait and see."

Golfers still embrace the beloved, time-tested traditions. Otherwise, they wouldn't make pilgrimages to hard-to-reach places such as St. Andrews (where the game in its original form can still be experienced.)

The good news is that the future of golf can still be a prosperous one. The ingredients exist to save the sport by returning to a few common sense values that return the focus to fun over consumerism. ■