

**Cleaning up after the guard dogs was one of the mundane duties performed by COO Hawken when he arrived at Ping 34 years ago.**



# PING'S QUIET MAN

For 34 years, **Doug Hawken** has been a key player behind the scenes for Ping

**E**VER SINCE THE LATE KARSTEN SOLHEIM started building Ping putters out of his Redwood City, Calif., garage in 1959, the company's philosophy has been to "help you play your best." With innovations such as heel-toe weighting, customization, and high-tech engineering, Ping has done just that, and the company's standards remain just as demanding today as an industry leader. Solheim relocated the company twice, first to Scottsdale in 1961, and then to Phoenix in '66. Over the years, Ping has gotten involved in golf club ownership and government industrial contracts, but the company continues to focus its strengths on the golf club market. The Solheim family has always been the public face of Ping—Solheim's son John A. Solheim is now Chairman & CEO, and *his* son, John K. is Vice President, Engineering. But the man behind the scenes is a 34-year Ping veteran, President & COO Doug Hawken. A tall, athletic, jovial man with a wry smile, Hawken is always thinking ahead. *Arizona, The State of Golf* had an opportunity to visit with him recently, and he talked about the game, its future, and the Ping philosophy.

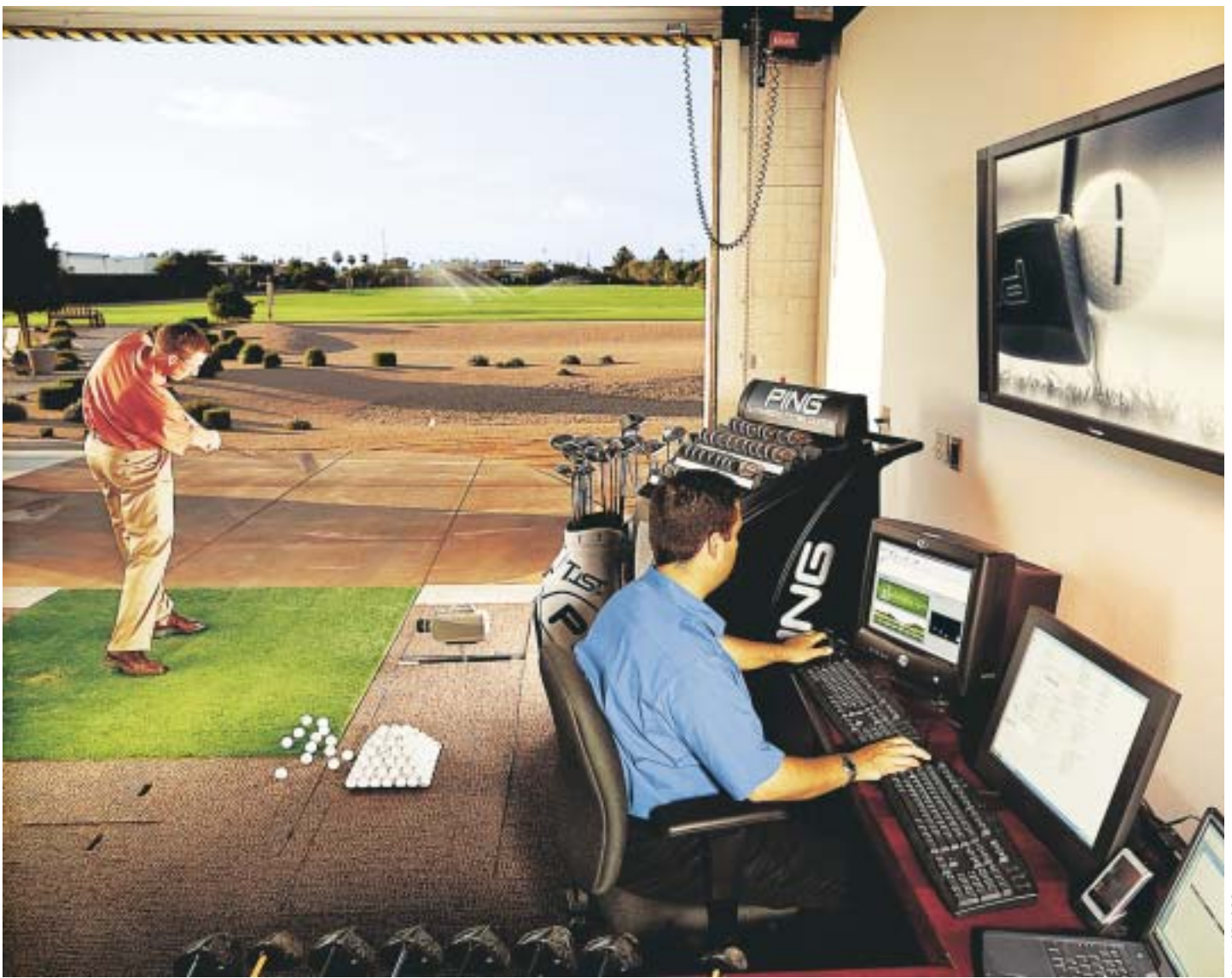
**State of Golf:** How would you define the "state of the game" from the perspective of an industry-leading golf equipment manufacturer?

**Doug Hawken:** The game is healthy from our perspective. We've seen just about everything in our 45 years in the business and we're confident golf's future is bright. Like all businesses, it ebbs and flows. But we're in it for the long-term, and not driven by short-term results. Our focus is on making better product that adds to the enjoyment of the game. If we continue to do that, everything else will take care of itself. I'll also add that we're lucky to be in this business. It's full of passionate people and it's a game that can be passed on for generations.

**SOG:** What is your reaction to the criticism that high-tech equipment is making older (shorter), traditional courses unplayable for the Tour-caliber golfer?

**DH:** Golf is an impossible game to master. We're in the business of adding to the enjoyment of a sport played by millions of

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY ROBERTS



COURTESY PING

**Ping's clubfitting facility in Phoenix is among the most sophisticated in the world, providing feedback on every element of a player's swing.**

people who define enjoyment in a variety of ways. For some, it's breaking 90 for the first time. For others, it's eliminating a slice. And for others it's shooting even par. Those are the people we're most focused on, and I haven't heard any of them complaining that the game is getting too easy.

**SOG:** Every year the golf industry introduces the consumer to new products. What is new from Ping, how is it different, and how difficult is it to maintain a product life-cycle?

**DH:** We come to work every day with the goal of trying to make a better prod-

uct. Some days we uncover a major breakthrough, others a small improvement. But the fact is, you can't schedule innovation. When we believe we have a better product, we make it available to golfers. That in itself ensures a meaningful life cycle. One reason we're able bring new product to market faster today is due to the technology available to our engineers. They can design quicker, prototype faster, and produce more efficiently. But all that means nothing if you don't have the understanding and expertise of what it takes to design a golf club. Our engineers have that ability.

Our most recent examples of that are the G2 iron Series, S59 Blade iron, Si3 380 driver, G2i putter series, including the incredibly popular Craze-E model,

"Golf is an impossible game to master."

the Doc17 putter and G2 fairway woods. All have met with consumer acceptance and each represents a performance improvement over the previous model.

**SOG:** Ping has always advocated clubfitting for all players, regardless of age or gender [late Ping founder Karsten Sol-

heim more or less invented the concept]. How has clubfitting changed?

**DH:** When Karsten pioneered custom fitting in the late 1960s, he did so because he was convinced it would help golfers improve their performance on the golf course. Our company hasn't wavered from that stance since. The process has evolved considerably, but the benefit hasn't. It is still about ensuring you have the right clubs for your game so you can play your best. From engineering to manufacturing, our process is geared toward custom fitting. Every club we make is calibrated to precise specifications. That's the only way we make clubs.

As awareness for fitting has grown and other companies have seen the merits, golfers have become more educated about the process. That only makes us stronger. We pioneered it, we innovated it, and golfers know that. Our customers also know it, and that sets us apart.

We're so committed to it, that I'd caution golfers who don't get fit that they aren't getting full value by overlooking the benefits of fitting.

**SOG:** The first Ping drivers were like the Ping putters of the 1960s—loud and unusual—how important are the acoustics of the newer models?

**DH:** Our extensive research into the role of sound in a golf club indicates a strong correlation between sound and feel. Without revealing too much, it's clear a club's auditory response has a significant effect on a golfer's perception as to whether they struck the ball solidly. So sound and feel are directly related.

Plus, as Karsten found out with his first putter, sound is a great attention getter. So from a marketing standpoint, the unique sound is not only a conversation starter, but also a reminder of your brand every time a tee shot is hit. That falls into the invaluable "word of mouth" marketing category, which as we all know, you can't buy.

**SOG:** From the volume of research and data you've collected from your state-of-

the-art PING Research Center, what have you discovered that will help the average golfer?

**DH:** Ping invented "game-improvement" 40 years ago with the average golfer in mind. Through innovation and club fitting, we've advanced our product offerings to enhance the enjoyment of the game. The advancements are countless, but the main thing we've learned is we have a lot more to learn before we design the perfect golf club. That's the good news. As we study the relationship between club, ball and human, we're continually opening doors to areas never before explored. We know we can design clubs that go straighter and longer, feel better, and are more consistent. We've

what we do is our biggest asset. Whether it's product design or clubfitting or anything else, we want to continually raise the bar. We're focused on quality, service, and innovation. That won't change.

**SOG:** How did you get your start at Ping?

**DH:** It was 1970. I was going to school at Arizona State University and had just met my future wife, Susan. I was looking for a summer job and a friend of mine mentioned this guy who was making golf clubs in North Phoenix. He said he was hiring summer help. That guy turned out

"We've accomplished a lot in our history, as millions of golfers will attest."

accomplished a lot in our history, as millions of golfers will attest, but we have a long way to go. I can honestly say we look forward to that pursuit.

**SOG:** What is your outlook for Ping, and in golf overall?

**DH:** Our business is extremely healthy right now. The new products we introduced for this year are performing beyond expectations. So product-wise, we like our position. We're also evolving as a company. The dynamics of the golf business have changed in the last several years. From added competition, increased marketing budgets, and retail pressures, we've had to approach the business differently. We've embraced those challenges and are as excited as ever to move forward. Our passion for

to be Karsten Solheim, and I've been here ever since. My first job was maintenance-related. Among my duties was cleaning up after the guard dogs.

**SOG:** Not to put you on the spot, but, how would you describe your golf game—handicap, scores, and how often you get to play?

**DH:** My golf game has a lot of potential, which means I haven't done anything yet. I'm very competitive by nature and golf's a humbling game. But I keep trying. I've been fortunate to play some of the greatest courses in the world. I'm a seven-handicap and play in spurts. I might play several times a month and then not play for a month. A lot of my golf is business-related, but I do enjoy playing with my son and other family members. ■