

Spreading the length/loft gospel

Custom builder Tom Wishon believes most players would gain length with shorter drivers

By James Achenbach

Drivers are easier to hit than ever before, so what's the beef?

According to one veteran observer who isn't afraid to venture out on the proverbial limb, driver lengths are too long and lofts are too low.

That's the belief of Tom Wishon, who says modern golfers are sacrificing accuracy and consistency in their quest for distance.

Wishon, the founder of Tom Wishon Golf Technology in Durango, Colo., says most golfers would gain length with a shorter driver. By shorter, he means 43 or 43½ inches instead of 45 inches, which is today's standard driver length.

This may seem counterintuitive, but Wishon maintains that a shorter length means more consistent, more solid contact. And that means more distance.

"Too many people automatically assume that a longer driver will give them more length," Wishon says. "Actually it's the opposite. For most people, a longer driver will mean less length because it becomes more difficult to hit the ball in the center of the face."

Wishon isn't the only person saying this, but his voice is louder and perhaps more authoritative.

After starting his golf career as an assistant club professional, Wishon joined Dynacraft Golf and became the component seller's lead club designer. He later accepted the same role with Golfsmith, the component and retail business.

Titleist also was interested in hiring him, but he decided to go on his own. He designs his own clubheads and sells them along with other components.

In April 2005, Wishon's latest book, "The Search For The Perfect Golf Club," was launched. The hardbound book was a surprise hit and is widely available from major bookstores or Internet book sellers (\$24.95).

Not everyone agrees with Wishon about length. Barney Adams founded Adams Golf and has sold stock drivers as long as 46 inches.

"I've got to believe," Adams says, "that golfers wouldn't continue to buy drivers at this length if they couldn't hit them. People aren't dummies. They aren't going to buy products that don't work. You know, we're all amazingly adaptable, and I suspect that the length of drivers has become longer because we have learned to handle them."

A crucial factor, of course, is materials. Lightweight, durable graphite shafts have enabled

These balls forced the world's best golfers to use more loft in their drivers.

Just look at tour pros. Driver lofts steadily have gone up. The average loft on the PGA Tour once was about 8 degrees. Now, at any PGA Tour event, the average loft will exceed 9 degrees and sometimes approach 9.5.

"We've had plenty of guys win with 10-degree drivers," says Tom Stites, Nike's lead golf club designer. "We had one guy win with an 11-degree driver."

Chris McGinley, vice president of golf club marketing for Titleist, says "Nine and a half degrees is the general area for touring pros, and 10½ degrees is where many serious amateurs perform best."

That being said, the new Titleist 905 driver series has a choice of driver lofts that start at 7.5 degrees and increase in 1-degree increments up to 11.5. The 7.5 and 8.5 heads might appeal to stronger golfers, but the 9.5 and 10.5 are by far the most popular.

"Almost all golfers would be better off with double-digit loft," Wishon says. "We need to get rid of this idea that lower lofts will produce longer drives. It just isn't true for most golfers."

"If a golfer has a swing speed less than 90 (mph), 10 or 10.5 are bad choices. He needs more loft than that. A lot of men need 14 or 15 degrees. Many women need 20 degrees."

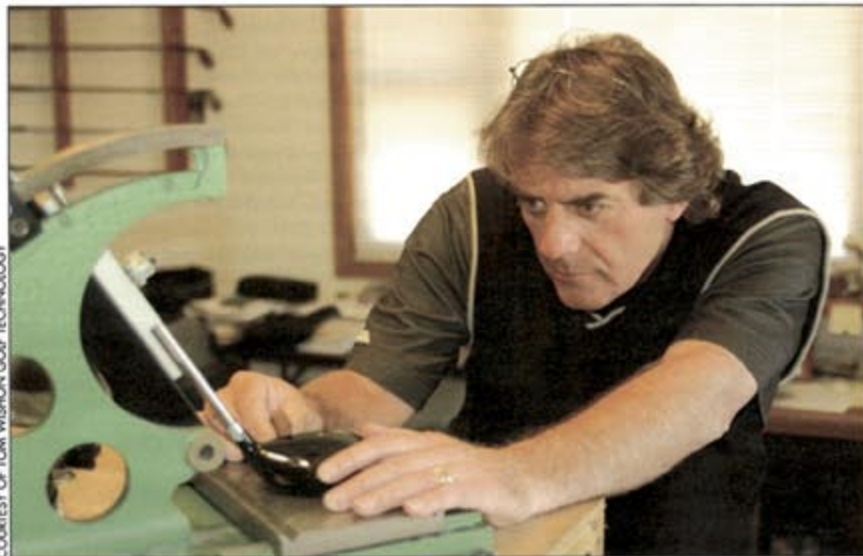
Returning to the subject of ideal length, Wishon recalls that a Golfsmith study showed clearly that "the only people who picked up distance with longer lengths were the pure athletes."

"A longer length makes it difficult to keep the club close to your body. It takes more effort to swing the club, and golfers lose speed. Meanwhile, the club usually doesn't have a consistent path. The angles start to break down for a lot of players."

Off-center hits might be public enemy No. 1 for golfers. Wishon says that for each half-inch offcenter, a golfer loses 5 percent of his potential distance.

To prevent this, Wishon is focusing on the L words – length and loft. "Less length, more loft" is his battle cry.

For more on Tom Wishon Golf Technology, visit www.twgolftech.com



Tom Wishon worked with Dynacraft and Golfsmith before starting his own company that designs club components in Durango, Colo.

drivers to grow longer without becoming heavier. In fact, today's drivers are 2 inches longer yet 2 ounces to 3 ounces lighter overall than the 43-inch, steel-shafted drivers of another era.

Go back to 43 inches, Wishon advises. If not all the way to 43, then cut back gradually. Start at 44½ rather than 45. See how that works.

And while you're at it, get a driver head with more loft.

There is more agreement on the loft issue than there is on length. With a heavy emphasis on high-launch, low-spin drives in the contemporary game, a driver with additional loft often is required to achieve the high-launch part of the equation.

Where did this high-launch, low-spin terminology come from? It started with golf balls. The credit belongs to golf ball engineers, who, with new materials and new aerodynamic designs, were able to design balls that fly higher and farther with less backspin.