

Gifts galore for naughty/nice golfer

by Tod Leonard

In the spirit of "any golf gift is better than the best pair of socks," we offer this shopping guide, with the hope that this year in golf brings you better scores, better friendships and only a pinch of insanity.

COOL STUFF

GIFTS FOR THE GOLFER - Whether it's a 'Life is Good' shirt, a football head cover or a box of birdie balls - a practice ball that mimics the flight of a golf ball - this holiday shopping season brings a number of options for the golfer on your list. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin. "Life is Good" - A great motto, and a fun, casual clothing line that features the now-familiar stick figures with big smiles on their faces. Golf is big in the LIG world, and they've got a nice selection of items. Honestly, I'm as happy getting one of the pigment-dyed T-shirts (\$23) as I would be with an \$80 polo. The items include pajama bottoms (\$30), boxers (\$20), women's tech T-shirts (\$30), hats (\$20) and coffee mugs (\$10).

It seems like, overnight, everybody in the airport had a suitcase or briefcase with a pull handle. Now there's a golf bag, the Datrek Roller (\$150), for those who just can't shoulder the load from the parking lot to the golf cart. For the serious walker, there is the Bag Boy C550 (\$160) that is very heavy duty, has fat tires, and still folds to an amazing 27 inches.

Most women golfers would probably agree: Few players on the LPGA have more fashion sense than Paula Creamer, including her sunglasses. And now she has her own Paula Creamer Collection of shades (\$70). And no, not all of them are pink! Paula has her own line of pink Precept golf balls, and if you catch any flak from your friends, ladies, tell them the Pink Panther won on the tour this year with them.

The Birdie Ball is a practice ball that first appeared a few years ago. It really isn't a ball, but a plastic thing that looks like a napkin ring. It can mimic the flight of a golf ball, but doesn't fly far. A nice practice tool in a small yard, Birdie Balls are \$25 per dozen, and separate accessories include a plastic strike pad with balls (\$35) and a short-game target with balls (\$40).

For those who never get the time to wash their clubs at the course, there's the Club Tub (\$50). It's a compact, portable tub with internal brushes to quickly clean your clubs.

The Bullseye Cup (\$20) is a yellow plastic ring that fits into any cup on the putting green and reduces the opening to the cup by one-third. A good way to sharpen your putting aim, and it can also be turned to take a better line on breaking putts.

HIGH-TECH STUFF

By far, my favorite conceptual gadget of the year is the Exelys Breakmaster Digital Green Reader (\$80, www.breakmaster.com), seen in commercials on The Golf Channel. This contraption is as illegal as a juiced ball when it comes to competition, but it figures to be a real eye-opener for most golfers.

Putting guru Dave Pelz will tell you that the average hack has no idea how to truly read breaks in the green, that most of what we do is complete guesswork, so anything that might put some science to the task should be valuable. You place the Breakmaster near your ball on the line of the putt, and it will read the severity of the slope and display an arrow that shows how much to play the ball outside the hole. Of course, it's not a cure-all, since speed and the quality of your stroke are huge factors, but at least it gives us a repeated visual image of the line. It seems like a great practice tool.

The most practical high-tech gadget? That's any easy one, too. In the past few years, nothing I have tried has helped my game more than the Bushnell Pinseeker (\$400). I gush about it to anybody I play with. Friends get addicted in only one round.

There are so many yardage gadgets out there, but the binocular-sized Pinseeker accomplishes everything. It can focus in on most targets - trees, rocks, bunkers, water, flagstick - and give you the exact yardage. The

comfort of that knowledge in club selection is crucial, and I love the slope reader, although it is illegal in competition. It's eye-opening how much yardage can be added or subtracted because of the slope. If I come up way short now, there are no excuses.

SILLY STUFF

New to the wacky category: golf fortune cookies (\$7). They come in a golf-themed takeout box and produce fortunes such as "A wise golfer never doubts the boss' score" and "Golf is not a matter of life and death (it's more important than that)."

Now that the golf-ball globe has been around awhile, we needed a new mind-twisting puzzle. It arrives in the form of the Bits and Pieces Puzzle Game (\$15), thinly tied to golf because it features a golf tee and ball that really have nothing to do with the puzzle. The goal is to navigate a small piece of rope through a series of rings. The globe ball is probably still more fun.

Caddyshack Trivia (\$25) is new. It plays like a round of golf, with par-3 and par-4 cards, and there are 1,003 questions. Samples: How much was the final bet on the big match? What college did Danny want to attend? What times are the caddies allowed to use the pool on Caddy Day? If you can answer those off the top of your head, you're nuttier than a Baby Ruth.

Vegas Golf Chips (\$20) and Ka-Ching (\$20) are additions to on-course games. Both use chips to represent different shot outcomes (water, trees, double bogeys) that are passed around from player to player and added up at the round's end.

There's always one that you scratch your head about and say, "Do the people who make this play golf?" This year it's the Incred-A-Ball (\$20), a remote-controlled ball "designed to bring tons of fun to any golf match." So just like the exploding ball, you're just going to slip this in your buddy's pocket, and he'll never notice the difference between it and his Pro V1. Riiiiiiiiiiight!

On the other side of clever is a Cigar Jockey (\$8). This thing clips to the top of a golf bag and it holds a cigar. Better yet, it can stick into the ground like a tee and hold not only a stogie, but a golf club if you want to keep from getting the grip wet.

READ THIS

Mark Frost, author of one of the sport's all-time great books, "The Greatest Game Ever Played," produced another wonderful telling of a true tale this year in "The Match" (\$25). It's the story of a high-stakes, 1956 showdown arranged by Eddie Lowery, the former kid caddie of Francis Ouimet who became a wealthy auto dealer in San Francisco. At Cypress Point, Ben Hogan and Byron Nelson take on amateurs Ken Venturi and Harvie Ward in a match that produces 27 birdies and an eagle. Guess who wins?

Two other standouts come to mind: "Tommy's Honor" (\$27.50), Kevin Cook's account of the lives of Old and Young Tom Morris, and "Where Golf is Great" (\$60), a 5-pound coffee table book on Scotland and Ireland that was named Book of the Year by the U.S. Golf Association.

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