Golfers dare to go square

by Jennifer Davies

For all of golf's traditional trappings, the business that surrounds the sport thrives on innovation.

Each year, golf companies such as Callaway, Nike and TaylorMade attempt to come up with new equipment that helps players hit the ball farther and straighter - all within the rigid technological guidelines of the United States Golf Association.

The industry has been buzzing about the emergence of the square-head driver, with Callaway and Nike introducing their own versions. The promise of the square head is that it will help less-skilled players hit the ball straighter more often.

GOING SQUARE - New golf clubs with square faces are designed to shoot straighter, but not everyone believes it. Seen here is the $499 Callaway FT-i. CNS Photo by Scott Linnett.

But while initial sales have been strong, there are plenty of questions about whether these square clubs will transform the game. The unconventional shape, a lack of tour players using them and the cost could hamper the adoption of the clubs. Yet industry watchers say that if the clubs can actually help the average player hit the ball straighter, there will be a substantial market for them.

Danny Colleran, owner of Polar Golf Shop in San Diego, said he has already sold out of the Callaway square-head driver, the FT-i, which retails for $499, as well as the Nike version, the Sumo Squared, which retails for $399.

"The feedback has been good, surprisingly good," Colleran said.

Casey Alexander, an analyst who covers the golf industry for Gilford Securities, said Callaway models are selling well at golf shops on the East Coast.

"At first blush, it does appear to be selling though, and that's in markets where it's still freezing," he said. Colleran has ordered more of the square-head clubs, but he said it's too early to tell whether they will have the longevity of other drivers. For instance, in years past, smaller companies without the name recognition of Callaway or Nike introduced a horseshoe-shaped club and the Power Pod driver, which Colleran described as a cylinder with a shaft coming out of it.

"There have been some odd-shaped clubs in the past that have faded away," he said.

The constant quest to build a better club is as much about economic survival as it is about improved performance; the companies need to give golfers reasons to buy more equipment. But while some technological innovations - such as oversized driver heads or the switch from woods to metal woods like titanium - have been revolutionary, the golf business is littered with products that end up more as gimmicks than paradigm shifts. At least one company is betting against the long-term popularity of square-head clubs. TaylorMade, the Carlsbad, Calif., golf equipment company that is the No. 1 seller of drivers, has no intention of jumping on the square-head bandwagon.

Mark King, president of TaylorMade, said square-head clubs use interesting technology but are ultimately niche products. He said his company's two new drivers, which are traditionally shaped, give pros and average golfers what they really crave: distance off the tee. "It's not going to be a big factor in the business," King said of the square-heads.

Still, Casey said the fact that Callaway and Nike came out with square-head drivers helps each company's case with consumers. "The companies validate each other," he said. "It's like the old saying. One man can be crazy. With two people, it's hard to say they are both crazy."

Bob Lukasiewicz, Nike Golf's product director of clubs, said his company, which trails significantly behind Callaway and TaylorMade, is glad to have Callaway's company in the square-head market. "It's helped. It's given it credibility. Nike is five years in the golf club business," he said. "We still have to win people over." Callaway, which has struggled in recent years as it lost market share and cachet in the driver market to TaylorMade, could also benefit if the square-head driver takes off.

Terry McAndrew, editor of Web Street Golf Report, which tracks the industry, said that if square-head drivers create a subcategory in the market, it could hurt TaylorMade because golfers typically buy one driver at a time.

"Essentially, every sale of a square-head driver is the loss of a possible sale for TaylorMade," he said.

Colleran of Polar Golf Shop said the square-heads have not yet affected TaylorMade. Its new drivers are also selling well, as are new Callaway drivers that are more traditional in shape. King said all the attention the square-head drivers have received is due to the shape and has less to do with actual performance. But Jeff Colton, senior vice president of research and development at Callaway, said the company didn't create a square-head driver for the sake of being different. Instead, it came up with the shape to fulfill a certain objective - to create the straightest driver possible. In short, form really did follow function, Colton said. The concept, which Callaway has been working on for almost four years, was the result of USGA rules and new materials that made the club possible, Colton said.

The USGA has strict limits on the size of a driver and how fast the ball can fly off the head of the driver. Callaway ran afoul of the USGA rules when its ERC II driver was ruled not in compliance in 2000. Sales suffered as the driver was effectively branded a cheater's club. With the USGA limit on club size at 460 cubic centimeters, Colton said working with the shape is one way to improve a driver's performance. The square shape allows weight to be dispersed to the corners of the club head, stabilizing the shot and creating a straighter ball trajectory.

"Physics makes the square more forgiving," Colton said. Lukasiewicz of Nike explained the square-shape advantage by comparing it to the physics of figure skating. A figure skater spins faster when her arms are closer to the body. When she extends her arms, it disperses the weight and slows down the spin. In golf, the resistance to twisting makes it easier for an average player to hit the ball straighter. Lukasiewicz said the Sumo Squared driver is "a figure skater with two dumbbells in her hands."

That is exactly the problem with square-head clubs, argued King of TaylorMade. He said the shape hurts the distance the ball can travel because the face of that type of driver is not as high top-to-bottom, so as to save mass to fill out the square. The shallow face creates shots with more backspin and shorter flight. "There isn't a player in the world who wants to hit a shorter ball," King said.

King also said few, if any, pro players are using the square-head clubs on tour. Although K.J. Choi won the Chrysler Championship with Nike's Sumo Squared, most tour players are shying away from the square-head designs. Callaway and Nike also have introduced drivers this year with traditional shapes.

King said TaylorMade believes tour players have a direct impact on the average golfer's buying patterns. Tour players using - and winning with - a certain piece of equipment will help boost that item's sales, he said.

"The No. 1 influence is what is played on the PGA tour," he said.

But Tom Stites, director of product creation at Nike, disagreed, saying the casual golfer has different needs and demands than the traditional golfer.

"It's a club for the average player rather than for the highly skilled player," he said.

McAndrew said the square-head clubs might not follow the rule of tour play translating into sales.

"The vast majority of recreational golfers need help hitting the ball straight, and this product was created for this express purpose," he said.

McAndrew added that with multiple driver designs, consumers will "have to do their homework. They are going to have to take into account their likes and dislikes and their capabilities." Shop owner Colleran said what will ultimately influence golfers is word of mouth. If a friend uses the golf club and says it works for him, that will spur more sales.

"What it comes down to is him hitting the ball straighter and farther than you when last week you were hitting the ball straighter and farther than him," Colleran said.

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