

A new spin for an old brand

by Jennifer Davies

Playing golf with a Top Flite ball is about as cool as shopping for the latest fashions at Sears. That is to say, not very.

Once a mighty presence in the golf-ball market, cornering the low-end segment, Top Flite struggled in recent years as it dealt with management turmoil and modest budgets for product development and advertising.

But now Callaway Golf Co., which bought Top Flite out of bankruptcy in 2003, is hoping to turn that around with an aggressive marketing campaign aimed at recreational golfers.

From its Web site - www.theballstogoforit.com - to its TV spots featuring ESPN personality Kenny Mayne commanding viewers to "man up and play golf, dude" - Callaway hopes to transform Top Flite balls from an embarrassment to a badge of honor.

TOP FLITE - Callaway hopes to restore Top Flite balls' popularity with a marketing push emphasizing coolness factor and touting them as the low-cost choice for golfers. CNS Photo Illustration by Nelvin Cepeda. While Top Flite will never compete with the more expensive balls such as Callaway's HX series or Titleist's best-selling Pro-VI, Callaway hopes its new marketing push will make Top Flite the low-cost, cool choice. Think Target or the Pabst Blue Ribbon beer fad of a few years ago.

"You are not going to find the stuffy country club guy using this ball," said Michele Szynal, vice president of public relations for Callaway.

Instead, the ads, which appear on the Golf Channel and ESPN as well as in golf publications and Sports Illustrated, will focus on players who want a great story to tell over a beer rather than just a low golf score.

"There is a group of golfers who can't stand people who take the safe route," said Paul English, Top Flite's brand manager.

But English contended that it's not just the branding that has changed. The balls have improved dramatically as well. The old Top Flite balls were known as "Rock Flite" because of their hard feel, considered a bad thing by most golfers.

Now, with new technology used in the Top Flite D2, which has dimples within dimples (hence the D-squared name), the ball has a much softer feel. English said the double dimples maximize distance through superior aerodynamics, not the ball compression that gave the balls a hard feel in the past. To drive home the change, English and his staff sent sample Top Flite balls to retailers under the name RFID07 - Rock Flite Is Dead in 2007. The response, he said, was strongly positive. About 700 golf-course shops agreed to add the ball to their product list.

For the most part, Top Flite has been the mainstay of "big box" retailers such as Wal-Mart and Target, selling for about one-third of the cost of the high-priced balls. A pack of 15 Top Flite D2 balls costs about \$16, whereas as Titleist's ProVIX sells for about \$43 for a 12-pack.

"They were blown away," English said of the golf course shop buyers, who previously would have been reluctant to order Top Flite balls. "They had no choice."

Even with the improvements and the new marketing campaign, it's unclear whether Top Flite can fundamentally change its fortunes. Terry McAndrew, editor of the Web Street Golf Report, an industry publication, said Top Flite has languished too long for there to be a quick fix to its image.

"It's going to be a challenge, because you can't turn around several years of hardship in one season," McAndrew said.

Brandweek Managing Editor Chuck Stogel, who specializes in the golf business, agreed that Top Flite has its work cut out for it. Even before Callaway bought the company, Top Flite had a revolving door in its executive suite and a lack of focus in its marketing messages.

Adding to Top Flite's downward spiral was the fact that Callaway had its own problems after it acquired the company, making critical missteps in its clubs business. Instead of focusing on Top Flite, Callaway has had to spend much of the past three years trying to repair its own product lineup.

In addition, Top Flite's sales suffered as more companies entered the low-end-golf-ball business, including such brands as Maxfli and Pinnacle. TaylorMade is planning an aggressive marketing campaign for Maxfli, featuring golfer John Daly hanging out in a dive bar.

"It has lost incredible market share, both because of its troubles and because of the newcomers," Stogel said.

In the past, he added, Top Flite's marketing messages were ineffective, not to mention offensive and confusing. He recalled one campaign that had images of starving African children, ostensibly to show that everyone liked the brand.

"It was so off message, it was ridiculous," Stogel said.

He said the current campaign is strong, with the selection of Mayne as a spokesman a "good move," but that the biggest issue is for Top Flite to let golfers know the brand still exists.

Callaway wouldn't disclose how much it's spending on the campaign other than to say it's tripling its budget. Brandweek reported that Top Flite spent about \$4.1 million on advertising in 2005, but that number slipped to \$1.8 million in 2006.

Stogel said golf marketing has become exponentially more expensive since sports-equipment giant Nike entered the market with Tiger Woods as its spokesman and its oversize advertising budget.

But Casey Alexander, an analyst for Gilford Securities, said that whatever the outcome of the Top Flite campaign, there's little risk for Callaway because Top Flite is such a small portion of its business.

"It can't do worse, and that's all I care about," Alexander said, adding: "Am I looking for a quantum leap in Top Flite? No. But if that does happen, fantastic."

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