



by Brian Wilkes
Brian's Custom Clubs

FROM THE Club FITTING BENCH

Fresh Thinking About Club Length

For those of you who have had a fitting in my studio, you will know we take some time to ascertain the proper playing length for woods and irons. We do this for the driver by attaching a driver head to shafts of differing lengths and then checking impact stickers on the face of the club after each ball strike. What we are looking for is the effect of changing shaft length, or playing length, on where on the clubface the ball is struck. We want to find the optimum length where a player can swing and still have the best chance of an on-centre hit.

Convention would indicate that drivers typically are 43 to 48 inches in playing length. Forty-three inches was standard 20 years ago while today's standard is 43½ inches. That said, golf stores are filled with drivers that are 45½ inches. That's because manufacturers have convinced the golf public that a longer club can be swung faster. Maybe so, but it needs to be swung *with control*. Most of us don't control the long drivers very well. Without control, instead of hitting the ball with the driver, you might as well just pick up the ball and throw it into the woods.

Recently, Tom Wishon (one of the top club head designers in the business today) circulated a brief discussion paper with some fresh thinking about the proper playing length for drivers and fairway woods. He was reflecting on the fact that we tend to be much more

comfortable when setting up over irons than we are over woods, especially the driver. That's because the irons are a lot shorter, and more controllable. The standard length of a 5-iron is 38 inches. That's a lot shorter than the 45½-inch driver. But his point is, why not make drivers as short as irons, if players are comfortable over them?

What do I mean by comfortable over the iron? Well, when you set up, preparing to swing with a 5-iron or a 6-iron, etc., over the ball, you may feel much more comfortable and confident of a good hit than when you set up over your driver. If you are a golfer, you know exactly what I mean. The 5-iron is shorter and heavier, and you are more likely to strike the ball closer to the centre of the clubface for a good hit. Shorter and heavier are the key ingredients to better ball striking for a lot of mid to high handicap golfers. I can't tell you how many times a customer in my shop has told me they hit their three wood as long or longer than their driver. Well, it's shorter and heavier. Plus, it usually has 15 degrees of loft instead of the usual 10.5 degrees.

So what is Wishon on about here? Well, he's saying it's pretty clear that standard lengths in irons seem to be okay and work well for most golfers, because there is more of a level of comfort and sense of control over the shorter clubs. And, he's saying that as club fitters, we should not be hide-bound to using 43½ inches as a starting point for fitting drivers. Basically, he's asking what would be wrong with a 38 or 39-inch driver, if that is the length that a player is comfortable with?


This, or course, is heresy. Personally, I love radical ideas like this. But who'd seriously buy a 39-inch driver? Probably no one right now, but these kinds of ideas have a way of catching on. It could be that shorter drivers become a fad, when people learn that they can hit the ball with more control and in the centre of the clubface, where it flies the farthest.

An example will do here. I have a customer who said he had never hit his driver longer than about 190 yards. The driver length for that customer, suggested by my fitting ruler, was 43½-inches. We spent an hour or more changing to longer and then shorter shafts until we found a length that he hit the most on-centre hits with. Guess what? The length was 42 inches. So, I made him a 42-inch driver with the appropriate swing weight, grip size and correct flex, etc. He now consistently hits his driver well over 200 yards.

So don't scoff at shorter clubs. The key is to feel comfortable when you set up over the each shot, and to make sure that the playing length is no longer than you can control. I'm happy to discuss your playing length and other club needs. Just drop in or give me a call for an appointment.

For custom repairs or custom fitting, Brian Wilkes can be reached at brian@briansclubs.com, by telephone at 250-516-3392, or you can visit his website at www.briansclubs.com.

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