

The Problem of the Ball

A consideration of the fundamentals
on which the ultimate selection rests

By Max Behr

In a game the contest is for the control of a common ball. Skill is opposed to skill, and hence is relative to the tasks which the opposition sets. But, in all sports, skill is expressed along parallel lines. That is to say, in sports there is a conceivably ideal way in which the task of skill may be accomplished by all contestants. We are conscious of this in the playing of a golf hole. According to our abilities, we succeed or fail in paralleling this line. Thus golf belongs within the category of a sport. And in a sport skill is comparative in solving similar problems. The actual opponent in golf is made up of the hazards of Nature. These include all things which render the ball less strikable than it might otherwise be, and, most important, the changeful hazard of the wind. The human opponent is merely a psychological hazard except when his ball happens to interfere on the putting green.

In pastimes where use of it is made, the ball is the intermediary of skill. But, in games, due to the opposition of skill, it is the physical limitations of the players that supply a counterbalance which determines what the speed of the ball must be. This is evident if we imagine lawn tennis with its tightly strung racket being played with a ball a quarter or half again as resilient as the ball now used. The augmented speed of such a ball would overbalance the agility of the players to meet it, and the game would degenerate to a contest of mere pace, and so slam itself out of existence. Hence the standardization of the implements in games cares for itself. The gamester is not free to choose.

But golf lacks this counterbalance inherent in an active opposition. The golfer is free to choose. And in this connection it was unfortunate that the sudden spread of golf throughout the world was coincident with the invention of the rubber core ball. When the body is growing the mind knows little of choice. Childhood lays its hands on anything to satisfy its hunger. Its actions are instinctive. It sees the world in the light of quantity, and measures its growth by the strength of its muscles. This is exemplified in golf by the childish glee it takes in seeing how far it can knock the ball.

What has happened to golf is part of the complex in which civilization finds itself today. It is overwhelmingly interested in the extension of the human limitations of the body. How fast can it cover ground and water and fly through the air? How far can it hear by radio, and how far will it be able to see by television? Speed, speed, speed! And there will be no cessation to this hunger until new limitations are set up. Youth must first learn the quantity value of things before it can be expected to come to any appreciation of their quality. But during this period youth labors under the delusion that all extension of its powers to deal with things is something worth while by itself. It has yet to learn that quality is the outcome of balance. But being in a state of momentum it knows no other balance than that which keeps it from falling on its nose.

Consequently it is wholly unaware that with all things there is a point where any extension of quantity values must prove destructive. And one of these things is golf. And because the golfer is free to choose what the ball should be, he will choose wisely only if he maintains a sporting balance between it and the hazards it has to contend with. His opponent Nature has limitations as definite as human agility to cover space which limits the speed of the ball in games. In other words he must adopt towards his opponent the attitude of a sportsman. It is not how many fish we can catch or how many birds we can kill, but the manner in which we prosecute our designs against them. To be a game-hog requires no intelligence.

And what is it that more than anything else distinguishes a man as a true sportsman? I do not think that we shall go far wrong if we define him as one who endeavors to adjust his implements down to a point where they will just sustain his skill in order that upon it, and it alone, must depend the decision of the contest. Throughout all sports this attitude prevails. Golf alone for the time, being is an exception. And it is so because the ball we now use has so unbalanced the elements of skill that its cruder constituent pace has come to be dominant.

What is meant by this becomes apparent if we analyze skill at golf. Applied to the ball, it is roughly divisible in the ability to control its direction, pace, trajectory and cut. And to be effective these elements of skill must be coordinated in various combinations if they are to conquer the peculiar and divergent difficulties which hazards impose. But if this coordination is to require intelligence, it (Continued on page 34) follows that the intermediary, the ball, must be so balanced with the hazards it has to contend against as to keep these elements in a continual flux. Such a constantly changing call upon skill is to be found in all games. We are never permitted to exactly duplicate our moves.

But, if physical means are granted which encourage an over-emphasis being placed upon any one of the elements in particular,

instinct, which always seeks the easiest way, triumphs over intelligence. Hence skill becomes impoverished to the extent that physical means permit the dominance of any one of the elements to the destruction of their mutual interdependence. In other words true sportsmanship proscribes the use of physical means whereby any one of the elements of skill may be secured automatically.

That was the reason for barring the ribbed-faced club. The cultivation of skill to give the ball underspin became minimized to the extent that it could be secured automatically. The Royal and Ancient Golf Club barred the Schenectady putter because it thought that in some way it rendered easier the control of direction on the putting green. Its attitude was correct although its judgment was mistaken. And it is now questioning the steel shaft and its effect upon skill. But it compromises this correct attitude when it permits the use of a ball that has not only debased skill, but is a far greater offense to tradition than what the face of the club, the shape of the club or the materials of which it is made could ever be.

Now when we come to examine the opponent Nature it is evident that the player's control of the hazards of the ground is predicated upon his control of the hazards to which the ball is first subject. And these primary hazards are gravity and air resistance. Gravity is a constant factor, and its operation is fast or slow in the degree that air resistance slows up the ball. But the present standard ball shows by the length of its fall that it is not so much air resistance that brings it to earth but the pull of gravity. It is true that air resistance has some effect upon it, especially when a strong wind is blowing. But it is rare when this is ever sufficient to alter type of stroke. And this is the crux of the whole question.

All active games and sports require some indeterminate debatable hazard which compels a flowing of the elements of skill into ever new combinations. We can by bunkers and the location of the cup in relation to them force a player to play a high shot. We can by undulations perhaps force him to play a pitch and run, or a strictly runshot. But it is only by making him consider again the resistance of the air that we can acquire a variable hazard calling upon him at all times for variety of stroke to cover like distances regardless of the character of the ground hazards.

At the present time we expect to play holes the same way every time. They are a drive and an approach with a club of some certain loft. And this is true because the present ball places in the hands of the player a tool whereby he may satisfy his natural instinct to hit the ball the same way every time. He has only to be careful to select a club with the right loft. This he does by estimating the yardage to be covered. Then he hits the ball with a standardized length of swing. The resistance of the air being no longer an influential hazard, pace is exaggerated and trajectory is largely subject to mechanical control. And because in the longer shots to the green it is difficult to make the ball stay put, the prevalent habit today is to overplay clubs.

Now, all this has caused a deterioration of skill. But, worst of all, it has taken all variety out of golf. The manner in which a hole should be attacked never changes. Whereas if a proper ball were used the character of courses would literally change from day to day. And with its advent would come a renaissance of skill in golf. This was fully realized by the golfers who placed their names beneath the following Resolution:

WHEREAS, we think golf to be a more skilful pastime when opportunity is given for long brassie shots up to the hole, spoon shots held up into the wind, low running cleek shots against the wind, cunning variations of pitch and run, lofty iron shots over green guarding bunkers, high pitch shots with stop, the putt well and truly hit; and WHEREAS, it is our opinion that play with the standard ball now in use does not require a versatility of skill that was formerly necessary, and has degenerated to a point where it is only necessary to know how to drive, pitch and putt,

We recommend that, for championship play, a ball with a specific gravity of 1 be adopted; that is, a ball that floats in water. We are adverse to any compromise as to weight or size. Signed by, George Von Elm Macdonald Smith Bobby Cruickshank Al Watrous W. E. Melhorn Th. os D. Armour Willie Hunter Harry Cooper Joe Turnesa Johnny Farrell Eddie Loos Leo Diegel John Black Joe Kirkwood John Golden Jimmie Duncan Chas. E. Guest Ed. Dudley, Jr. Eddie Gayer Bill Greavy Nick Weber S. W. Hutchison Joa. Carbery John H. Junor Arthur Clarkson Tom Stevens Phil Taylor Herold A. Sampson Lewis Scott Frank Walsh A. Bollock-Webster Leonard B. Schmutte Harold Sanderson Jack Malley Arthur Brooks Joe Novak

You will note that they express their preference for a ball that floats in water. This was the ball that the Royal and Ancient Golf Club wished to standardize in 1920, but owing to the insistence of the American committee that such a change would place too great a financial burden on the ball manufacturers, the 1.62 compromise was arrived at. At the time I called attention to the grave error that had been made. That it was an error has finally become established. In its efforts to correct it the U. S. G. A. made certain experiments with balls of various weight and size. It selected a ball that weighed 1.55 ounces with a diameter of 1.68 inches. This selection represented nothing more than the expression of the personal preference of those involved in making the choice. But my own experience and that of others proves this ball to be quite inadequate in cutting down distance. It was a blessing in disguise that the R. and A. committee were set against any change at all when it was presented for consideration.

It is all important at this time that some limitation is arrived at that will do for all time. To standardize a ball that must float in water presents a natural limitation. The fear is expressed that the art of ball making will likely improve to a point where it will be possible

to drive such a ball much farther than the small heavy ball. If such a likelihood is part of the future, then the experiments which the U. S. G. A. committee are making to devise a machine whereby resiliency may be measured and limited will be of value. But there is no need of our waiting until these experiments are final.

I can see no reason why we should not now adopt and standardize the floater. My judgment and experience deserve a certain respect. I have played steadily with it for a year. I have not gone from one ball to the other. And I have not played with it to set an example. I have played with it because I get from it what to me alone is golf. And if a course is not too long, say not over 6,350 yards, I actually score better. There exists an idea that scoring would go up. It will undoubtedly on courses of championship length. Here there must be some regulation. But at a hole of 450 yards, Bobby Jones instead of getting home with a mashie in two will probably require a brassie. But off any club the floater stays somewhere near where it lands. One can bang it up to the green with all the confidence in the world. That is why I am positive the short player will score just as well with it. Indeed I know a few who have given it a trial and have actually done so. And they have done so because they have had a lighter and larger ball to hit, making the task of getting the ball into the air much easier.

My own experience has been rather astounding. I mention it because it may have some persuasion. Never until I again came to play with the floater had I broken 70. At the Lakeside course, Hollywood, California, with a playing length at the time of about 6,300 yards, I had two consecutive rounds in 69 and 67. There are four short holes, leaving fourteen second shots. In the score of 67 these were made up of 2 drivers, 2 brassies, 2 spoons, 4 full mid-irons, 3 full No. 3s, and a mashie-niblick.

Now I cannot count myself worthy as a golfer where championships are concerned. But with the present ball a course that would require such clubs to approach with would have to be at least 7,500 yards in length. Is there any golfer living that could do it in 67? Emphatically no. Why then was I able to play such length approaches judged by the clubs used, and go round in 67? Simply because in certain respects the floater is easier to play with. But at the same time that it is easier to play with, it calls for all the clubs in one's bag.

And it does require some judgment and ability as to the type of stroke to be played. One cannot just automatically take out one's niblick and pitch a high shot into the wind. The wind plays havoc with a ball that has lost its pace. No, one must drive it through it at a low trajectory which Jerome Travels was able to do so beautifully with his jigger. It is this beauty and variety of stroke that must be retrieved.

And at the moment the ball that will do this is a floater with a diameter of 1.70 inches. My conclusion after experimenting with various sizes is therefore the same as that of J. H. Taylor. And if we take as our factor of resiliency that of two English makes on the market today, I verily think we are set for all time. And should the U. S. G. A. experiments fail to control added resiliency, it is quite possible that it can be controlled permanently if the diameter of the ball is stepped up to 1.72 inches. This was the diameter of the old Spalding Glory Dimple. It is highly probable that this added diameter would accomplish all that is needed to meet any threat of added resiliency in the future.

Now that Bobby Jones has come to realize how absurd golf is with the present standard ball, a change is bound to be effected. But the new regulation should be for championships only.

If those who are young to golf, who are still imbued with that youthful spirit to knock the daylight out of the ball, wish to use the present ball, why should they be denied? Let them. We have all had the wish at some time in our lives to fish with a stick of dynamite. We wanted to know how many fish there were in the pool. And that wish was about as intelligent as our desire today to see how far we can drive the ball. We all get over it sooner or later. But the sooner for golf the better.

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