



ARE YOUR clubs YOUR handicap?

As a golf instructor watching the ever-changing equipment industry, it's very easy to see how people could be confused when trying to find the right golf clubs. It's important to remember two things when considering new equipment: No one single design is right for every player and, no matter what design or brand of golf club you choose, your equipment should be made to fit your individual specifications.

After working with and learning from various PGA Tour players, one thing has become evident—the design, makeup and performance of their equipment is a high priority. They thoroughly test every piece of equipment before putting it in their bag. Regardless of the manufacturer or product, they know what equipment specifications they need in order to play their best.

Achieving a sound, consistent golf swing begins with finding the right specs for your equipment By Todd A. Sones

lie angle

if your equipment doesn't complement your body style and swing, you'll likely develop a variety of compensations that inevitably will prevent improvement. The more compensations you build into your golf swing, the more precise your timing must be. If you're one of those golfers whose swing consistency fluctuates from day to day, hole to hole or even shot to shot, you need to develop a golf swing that gives you a greater margin of error. Equipment that fits can promote this kind of development.

There are nine elements to clubfitting: length; lie angle; loft; shaft flex; shaft material; grip size and material; swingweight; total weight; and hosel type (conventional/offset). All nine elements should be addressed because they all affect the way you swing the club and contact the ball.

LENGTH

The length of the golf club affects both posture and balance. Players who use equipment that's too short tend to bend over too far, causing them to fall off balance with too much weight over the toes. These players often struggle with reverse weight shifts and swings that are too steep and lack power. Players who use equipment that's too long often compensate by standing too upright, with their weight set too far toward their heels. These players often struggle with laying the club off or swinging too flat.

When golfers have the correct length equipment, it allows them to set up with proper posture, which in turn helps them stay in balance and swing the club on-plane.

A common problem in golf today is that many golfers have gone too far with oversized, extra-long and ultralite drivers. Although golfers may hit the ball a few yards farther with an extra-long driver, they usually wind up developing two different golf

swings, one for the driver and one for the irons. These players tend to either have a good day with their driver or a good day with their irons, but rarely put the two together.

To test lie angle, put a strip of black electrical tape on the sole of your club and hit balls off an impact board.

LIE ANGLE

Lie angle, the measurement between the hosel and the ground, strongly influences the direction of ball flight. The correct lie angle rewards the player with a straight shot from a square hit. However,



too upright

Clubs that are too upright have the tendency to cause shots that start to the left of the intended target.



just right

Clubs that are set with the correct lie angles are more likely to produce shots that fly straight.

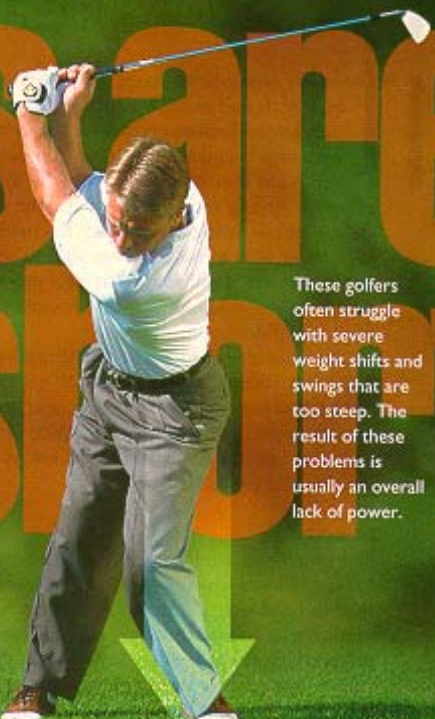


too flat

Clubs that are too flat have the tendency to cause shots that start to the right of the intended target.



The length of a golf club affects both posture and balance. Golfers who use clubs that are too short tend to bend over too far, placing too much weight on their toes.



These golfers often struggle with severe weight shifts and swings that are too steep. The result of these problems is usually an overall lack of power.



In contrast, golfers who use clubs that are too long often compensate by standing too upright, with their weight distributed too far toward their heels.



Golfers who use equipment that's too long often, and unknowingly, lay the club off or swing too flat. These compensations can result in both hooks and pushes.

if the lie angle is too upright (toe up), the ball will tend to start left of the target. If the lie angle is too flat (toe down), the ball will tend to start right of the target. In either instance, you'll have to find a way to compensate during your swing to make up for the incorrectly fitted clubs.

The best way to test lie angle is to put a strip of black electrical tape on the sole of your club and hit balls off an impact board. If the resulting mark on the bottom of the club is out toward the toe, then your club is too flat; if the mark is toward the heel, your club is too

upright. A football-shaped mark should appear in the center of the sole of the club if the lie angle is correct. It's important to note that your clubs need to be fitted dynamically to your swing. Clubs that are fitted statically—based solely on your height and body type—are rarely fitted correctly.

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LOFT

Many golfers misunderstand how the loft of the golf club affects ball flight. As a rule of thumb, too much loft is better than too little. A mistake many golfers often make is playing with a driver that has too little loft, which forces them to hang back on their right foot, creating a reverse weight shift, which actually adds loft to the club. They may start with an eight- or nine-degree driver but, due to their swing, the club actually has 14 or 15 degrees of loft at impact. When the loft is correct for the player, he or she is able to make a stronger move through the ball toward the target, without having to hang back to get the ball airborne.

SHAFT FLEX

Shaft flex is based primarily on swing speed and tempo. A properly fitted shaft allows the clubhead to rotate correctly so it's square to the target at impact. The correct shaft also allows the player to maintain proper tempo. If the shaft is too stiff, the golfer won't be able to load it fully, which will cause the ball to fly lower than normal and to the right. It may also cause the player to swing too hard in an effort to "feel" the club release through impact. If the shaft is too soft (weak) for a player's swing, the clubhead will overtake the shaft at impact, causing high shots that go to the left.

Ultimately, the player will compensate (consciously or subconsciously) to correct the problem. Then, the incorrectly fitted shaft may cause the player to hit the ball

in any direction, depending upon the particular compensation.

There are different ways to test players for shaft flex. The best is to check clubhead speed and watch the trajectory and the curve of the ball as it flies. The key is to hit different shaft flexes and see which works best. This is just one reason why clubfitting must be done outdoors.

SHAFT MATERIAL

Graphite is lighter than steel and also absorbs vibration during impact. It may give an advantage to the player who likes the feel of a lighter club. Graphite may also give relief to golfers who suffer from any pain in their shoulders, arms, wrists or hands.

Steel shafts tend to be more consistent and predictable, especially in irons. Players who prefer "heavier" golf clubs will prefer steel in their irons.

The important thing is to find out which shaft flex works best for each player's swing tempo, timing and clubhead speed by testing different shafts.

GRIP SIZE AND MATERIAL

The grip is an important component of the golf club because it's the contact point between the player and the club. There are many varieties and materials from which to choose. For instance, there are cord grips for players whose hands perspire frequently. Additionally, there are cushioned grips to absorb shock for players with physical problems in their hands or grips with arrows to help players align their hands properly. The important thing, once again, is to try different grips and make a choice you're comfortable with.

The size of the grip is often overlooked, but is extremely important. If the grip is too small, golfers may overuse their hands during the swing or even lose control of the club. Likewise, if the grip is too large, they may have problems releasing the club at impact, which results in a loss of power. Incorrect grip size can also create undue tension in the hands. The correct grip size will help the player control the club and release it properly.

SWINGWEIGHT VERSUS TOTAL WEIGHT

The swingweight of a golf club is a measurement of the clubhead taken by using a fulcrum 12 to 14 inches past the butt end of the golf club. One swingweight is equivalent to the weight of a dollar bill. Most people wouldn't consider this significant but,

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when you add in clubhead speed—say, 100 mph—it results in weight that you can feel during the swing. Most people will feel a difference of two swingweights during the swing. At that point, it becomes one's individual preference—some players prefer a C8 swingweight, while others prefer D2 or D4.

Total weight is simply the total weight of the golf club. When you change a component, such as switching a graphite shaft to a steel shaft, you change the total weight of the club. The only way to determine the best swingweight and total weight for you is to try a variety of clubs and see which works and feels best.

CONVENTIONAL AND OFFSET HOSELS

Offset simply means the hosel is in front of the leading edge of the golf ball. Conventional means the centerline of the hosel lines up with the leading edge of the club. An offset hosel has two basic functions: the first is to keep the ball moving toward the left of the target line (to help prevent slicing), and the second is to help the ball fly on a higher trajectory. Offset woods are an excellent way to help a player who has trouble losing the ball to the right.

CONCLUSION

Too often, people blame themselves for poor play when, in fact, their equipment is at least partly responsible. Golfers will always react to what the golf ball is doing in relation to the target. Proper feedback is essential in building proper habits.

If your golf club sends the ball off in the wrong direction when you do the right thing, it won't take you very long to try to compensate and do the wrong thing. Sometimes in golf, two "wrongs" compensate for each other and create a "right." The more compensations you have, however, the more your swing is sub-

ject to timing problems. Problems with timing make it difficult to be consistent. Often it's not how good our good shots are, but how good our bad shots are that helps improve our scores.

If you've decided to look into custom equipment or want to have your equipment evaluated, there are some things of which you should be aware. First, make sure you're being fitted outdoors. If the club-fitter can't see the ball fly in relation to an intended target, then he or she is guessing at your specs. Also, be sure you test different

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shafts, weights, lofts, etc., to find out what works best for you. Work with a reputable clubfitter, preferably one who's also an instructor and has the ability to assess your swing and how you're reacting to whatever club you're testing.

Finally, and most importantly, remember value is more than the price you pay for your equipment. Value is getting professional advice and quality equipment that fits, helps you play to your fullest potential and aids in your enjoyment of the game. ■

Phone List/ Custom Fitters

Adams Golf
(800) 622-0609

Cobra Golf
(800) BAFFLER

Henry-Griffitts
(800) 445-GOLF

Hogan
(800) 225-6601

Karsten Manufacturing
(800) 4-PING FIT

Kenneth Smith
(800) 234-8968

Lynx
(800) 456-3344

MacGregor
(800) 841-4358

Mizuno
(800) 333-7888

Orlimar
(800) 833-4266

Ram
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Slazenger
(800) 766-2615

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Titleist
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Wilson
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Zevo
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