

How good do you want to be?

As a teacher, I look forward to the day when all golfers have custom-fitted equipment. Too frequently, I find myself working with students who have purchased a new set of golf clubs that simply don't fit them. This often leads to unconscious compensations in their swings that create a variety of problems. For example, if a golfer has clubs that are too long, he or she might swing around his or her body too much and develop a swing plane that's too flat, which can result in extreme hooks or pushes. Conversely, a golfer whose clubs are too short will often develop a swing that's too upright and steep, leading to over-the-top slices and pulls.

The correct lie angle, or angle between the shaft axis and the ground plane, is also extremely important for solid shotmaking. For a long time, standard lie angles on off-the-rack clubs were tailored to better players (59° or 60° for a 5-iron) and were too flat for many recreational golfers. This tends to make the toe of the

club dig into the ground at impact, creating shots that push to the right. Recently, club manufacturers have come to realize this problem, and many have made their lie angles more upright (62° for a 5-iron), which better suits the majority of golfers. However, it's important to note that a club with an overly upright lie angle will tend to dig in at the heel, causing hooks and other poor shots.

OTHER IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF CLUBFITTING

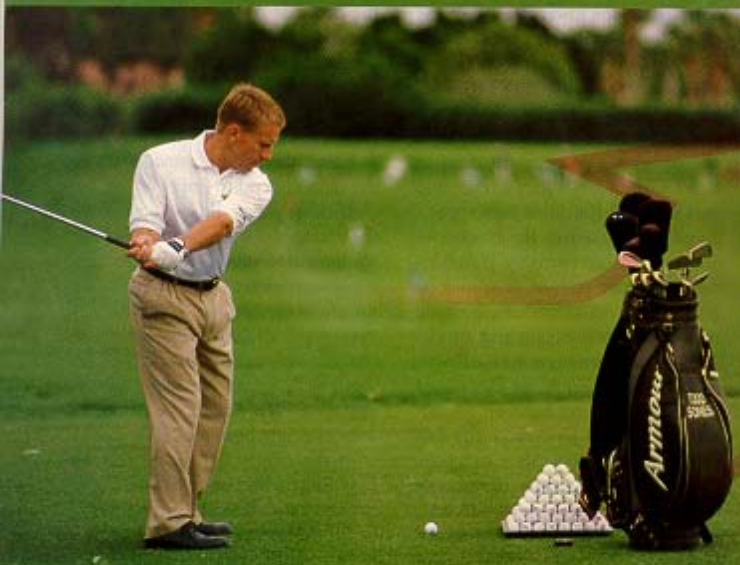
GRIP SIZE: Grips that are too big impede hand and wrist movement, preventing a full release of the club. This problem can cause an already existing slice to become severe or cause a fairly straight hitter to begin fading the ball. Conversely, grips that are too small tend to promote overly active hands and wrists, a problem that can result in wild hooks and a general lack of control.

OVERALL WEIGHT: Depending on your body weight,

Clubfitting For Compensation Vs.



An overly steep swing creates toe-down impact. In order to hit straight shots, this golfer needs more upright lie angles.



A swing that's too flat creates heel-down impact. This golfer needs flatter lie angles to compensate for swinging under the correct plane.

Development

BY TODD SONES WITH MIKE CHWASKY



Properly fitted clubs and an on-plane swing lead to a flush impact position with the middle of the sole contacting the ground.

age, fitness level and golf swing, you may need a club that's significantly lighter or heavier than what's considered "average." Often, golfers who buy off-the-rack irons, especially those with steel shafts, end up with clubs that are too heavy. To compensate for this problem, these golfers are forced to cast the club from the top of the swing, creating both slices and hooks. On the other end of the spectrum, golfers who buy clubs that are too light, particularly strong golfers who choose clubs with ultralight graphite shafts, often find that their tempo and timing are so thoroughly disrupted that they're unable to strike the ball solidly.

SHAFT FLEX: Arguably, the most important aspect of clubfitting—shaft flex—has everything to do with both the feel and performance of the club. Unfortunately, it's also the aspect of clubfitting that hurts recreational golfers the most. In the majority of cases, the average golfer plays with clubs that are fitted with overly stiff shafts. This is partly related to ego, but also to the outdated belief that a golfer should play with the stiffest shafts he or she can handle. On the contrary, many of today's teachers and fitters recognize that overly stiff shafts only create difficulties for the recreational golfer. Examples of these difficulties are swinging over the top, which creates pulls and slices, and simply being unable to load the shaft, which creates weak impact and low, non-compressed shots. In comparison, shafts that are more flexible are much easier to load and more forgiving overall.

LOFT: Loft is largely a product of shaft flex. Shafts that are softer or more flexible will create more dynamic loft (loft while the club is actually in motion), while stiffer shafts create less dynamic loft. The key is to find the right shaft first and then worry about loft. If you have a club, particularly a driver, with too little loft, you'll know because your shots will have a lower than optimal tra-

jectory and will hook or slice more than usual (the lower the loft of the club, the more sidespin it creates).

THE ART OF CLUBFITTING

Unfortunately, getting custom fitted doesn't necessarily ensure that you'll end up with a properly fitted set of clubs. Clubfitting is part science and part art, and if a fitter isn't experienced and qualified, the fit doesn't always come out correctly. If clubfitting was pure science, it would be easy. A fitter would first take the static measurements of height and knuckles to ground to determine the length of the club. Then he or she would have the player hit balls off an impact board with lie tape on the sole of the fitting club to determine the golfer's dynamic lie angle (the lie angle of the club in motion, not at address). Next, the fitter would measure club-head speed and swing tempo to determine shaft flexes and flexpoint. Finally, he or she would measure the size of the player's hands to determine grip size. The entire process would only take a short time, and the only remaining concern would be if the manufacturer could build the clubs accurately to the specifications.

In reality, the art of clubfitting relies not so much on these static physical measurements, but on the ability of the fitter to be able to assess a player's swing and reaction to the club in his or her hand. Once the fitter has a good understanding of the golfer's swing, he or she can then have a larger question to consider: Should this person be fitted for compensation or for development, or somewhere in between?

COMPENSATION VS. DEVELOPMENT

To understand compensation versus development, let's take a look at how a fitter might make the determination of the correct lie angle. Lie angle relates directly to swing plane. If a golfer swings the club over the top of the correct plane during the downswing, and wants clubs to compensate for an

overly steep move, the golfer needs the lie angle of his or her clubs set more upright. If a golfer swings underneath the correct plane and wants clubs to compensate for an overly flat move, he or she need clubs set at a flatter lie angle. These clubs would be fine for either player, provided he or she didn't intend to improve.

If either player did try to improve their respective swing planes, the equipment wouldn't reward them for it because it's set up to compensate for a faulty technique. Specifically, if the golfer with the overly steep swing started swinging the club on the correct plane, his or her shots would pull to the left due to the compensatory upright lie angles. If the golfer with the overly flat swing started swinging on the correct plane, his or her shots would tend to go right due to the compensatory flat lie angles. Neither golfer would benefit from improving their swing planes because the equipment they have was fit to work with an incorrect plane.

So the important decision to make before you're fitted is: Are you going to get your equipment fit to compensate for your setup and swing, or do you want equipment that's fit to improve and develop your setup and swing? To answer this question, there are certain things to consider.

First, how serious is your practice regimen? If you either don't have the time or the desire to really work to develop your swing (which admittedly isn't an easy task), then you might want equipment that compensates for your current technique. On the other hand, if you're not particularly happy with your golf swing, and are dedicated to putting in the necessary time and effort to improve, then you should get your clubs fit for development. Also, there are those golfers who practice and want to improve, but don't want to completely overhaul their current swing. For them, a fit that compensates a little, but also encourages some develop-

(Cont'd on page 111)

COMPENSATION

(Cont'd from page 18)

ment might be appropriate. It's really up to you. Ask yourself how good you want to be and how hard you're willing to work to get there. The answer to those questions will tell you how to fit your clubs.

Regardless of your decision, I recommend you find a professional who is both a teacher and a fitter—the two go hand in hand. A teacher can give you valuable feedback on how you're swinging and what you need to improve. A teacher can blend the science of fitting with the art of swing correction. The bottom line is that they can give you the information necessary to determine whether you want your clubs fit to compensate or to improve.

If you choose not to be fit on an outdoor range by a PGA professional, there are other methods available. For instance, several companies use computer technology to analyze the dynamic characteristics of the golf swing and prescribe the proper fit, solely from hitting balls into a net. There are also a number of manufacturers who can do on-line fittings through the use of a detailed questionnaire that covers both your physical characteristics and your golf swing. Finally, some manufacturers combine the use of computer analysis with traditional outdoor fitting techniques to try and gather as much information as possible before determining a proper fit.

Whatever method you choose, remember that the ultimate goal of clubfitting is to give you a set of clubs that allow you to reach your full potential. If you're serious about your game, you won't settle for anything less.

■ **Senior Instruction Editor Todd Sones** is regarded as one of the top 100 teachers in America. He operates the Todd Sones Impact Golf Center in Vernon Hills, Ill., and in Palm Desert, Calif. (847-680-6100).

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