



It's Always TEE TIME

The 'right' golf ball tough to find

Ignore the advertising and make wise choice

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TOM STAPLES
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NEWTON — So how much have golf balls progressed over the last couple of decades?

There are entire websites devoted to explaining the science behind "why our ball is best," and forums abound with opinions as varied as there are swing shapes and speeds.

And when it comes to television ads, "yes, they are technically true," said Robin Kohberger, head professional at Newton Country Club.

And the balls are definitely more durable than the balata-covered golf balls of three decades ago, and are aerodynamically engineered to give you more spin, less spin, more launch or less launch.

But distance? To Kohberger and assistant pro Tom Staples, the claims of longer off the tee aren't as critical for most amateurs.

"It depends on your skill level, your club head speed and durability is a factor," said Staples. "And, of course, price is a factor, too."

You can find golf balls on the course, and, if they aren't moving, they're free, to paraphrase Mark Twain, who probably played with a gutta percha ball (introduced in 1848) and replaced in the early 1900s by wound rubber balls.

New, store-bought golf balls now are made of two, three, four and even five pieces and range in price from about \$1 per ball up to nearly \$4 per ball. And if you buy them a sleeve at a time at a pro shop, the per unit cost can be over \$4.

With more than 1,000 brands of golf balls which have passed various tests to be listed as conforming by the U.S. Golf Association, one of two ruling bodies of the game, it would be

nearly impossible to try them all out to find the ball best suited for your individual game.

Despite what seems to sell, distance off the tee shouldn't be your prime consideration, said Staples.

"You only hit the driver 13, 14 times a round, but on every hole you have a shot from within 150 yards," he said. "That should be the ball for you."

Even Titleist, the best selling brand of golf ball, has a half-dozen type of golf balls. Another top seller, Bridgestone, has at least that many. Other popular brands, such as TaylorMade, Callaway and Srixon, Nike and Wilson, all have more than one type of ball.

Each type has a different compression or cover hardness or interior construction in various combinations.

First off is compression. The power off the tee comes from the golfer's ability to compress the inner core of the golf ball — a faster swing will create more compression and therefore more ball speed off the clubface.

Unless your swing, as the ads say, is up to professional standards, the highest compression balls aren't for you.

"The ball won't go anywhere unless you can compress the inner core," said Staples so the lower compression balls are more suited for slower swings.

The higher priced golf balls have more layers, making it more difficult to compress the inner core.

There are, however, combinations of mantles — the layers between the cover and the core

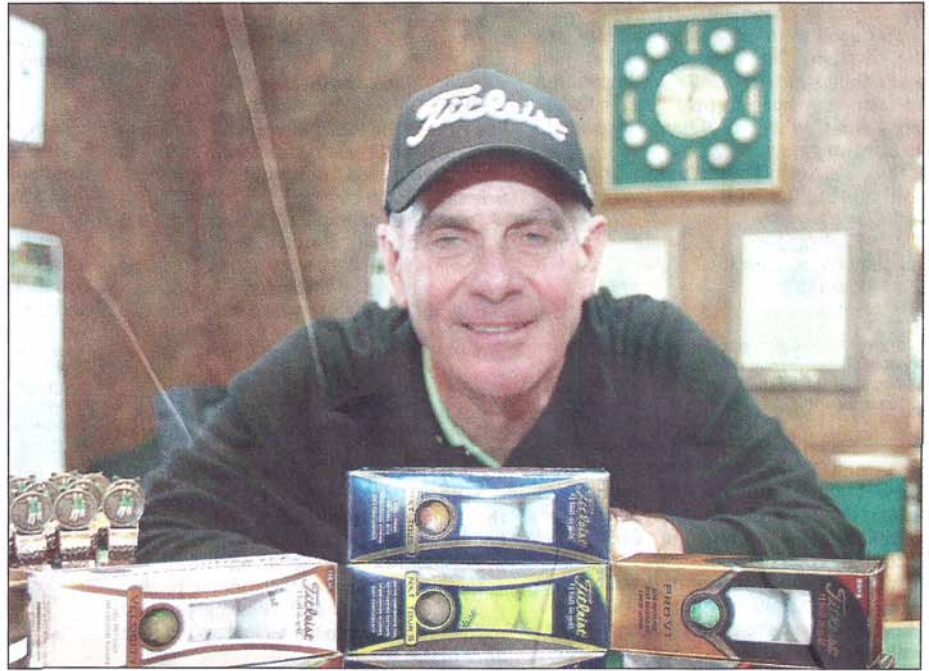


Photo by Tracy Klimek/New Jersey Herald

Assistant golf professional Tom Staples stands behind the counter of Titleist golf balls at Newton Country Club.

— that create a variety of overall compression.

Dimple patterns provide the aerodynamics of a golf ball, producing different trajectories. The choice there is whether your natural shot is a low ball or traces a high arc.

Cover hardness determines how much the ball will spin. For distance off the driver, less spin is preferred but around the greens, more spin is wanted for better stopping control, the hit-and-spin-backwards effect that pros create with their wedges and mid-irons.

The softer the cover, the more spin and the more "feel," that sensation in the hands that travels up the arms to the brain and creates confidence.

Around the green and on the putting surface, feel is all important.

And you can get too much spin and the ball heads off to

the secret hiding places in the woods that all golf balls instinctively find.

"That's the critical thing," said Staples. "If it gives you the right spin for your swing, and you feel good about it, that's the one."

Finding the "right" one can be elusive with so much advertising and distance claims out there and, well, just plain macho within your regular foursome.

There's a lot of information now printed on golf ball boxes, explaining the differences in the types of ball made by that manufacturer.

Websites, such as www.golfballtest.org, have ratings charts which list compression and cover hardness.

Staples and Kohberger both agreed that testing your swing with different golf balls on a launch monitor which can give

spin rates is the best way of finding the right ball for your swing.

Some companies, notably Bridgestone, have demo days at various golf courses, where an individual's swing speed and other factors can be measured.

A second approach is taking a sleeve or two of a couple of different types or brands and playing a round.

Hitting the same shot with two balls should only be tried when there is nobody behind you.

Otherwise, play three or four holes with one ball, then use a different ball for the next few holes to see the difference.

"There is no magic bullet out there," Staples said. "Really, find the ball that you feel most comfortable with and stick to that."