

Putting ahead

By Robert Hands

Golf has always been seen as the rich man's plaything and, as such, was for many years regarded as elitist. Much of that has now changed, with the recent explosion of enthusiasm for the game that has led to ever greater numbers wielding a driver on the fairways of the world. The change in dynamic of the profile of your average golfer has thus caused equipment manufacturers to think again about how they market their product.

With golf, as indeed any leisure activity, there is an in-built element of snobbishness, of keeping up with the Joneses: those who can afford to do so like to keep up with the latest technology, essentially just to show off. So the standard set of clubs will not do: there has to be some extra feature - perhaps the most delicate of lob wedges, or a seven-wood that boasts the ability to get out of the tightest of spaces.

Back in October, The Times featured the latest of these toys: the drivers with inset industrial diamonds that gave considerable benefits in distance to their user. Expensive the DR4E clubs certainly are, but effective, too. Having hit a number of balls on the range with them, I can testify personally to that. My driving yardage (with both driver and three-wood) was significantly increased by using these clubs - but not only that, my accuracy improved as well, since the science behind these clubs ensures that tiny inaccuracies in addressing the ball can be overridden by that diamond insert. Although it should be noted that it is no panacea for the golfer with an incurable shank.

Now the company that rolled out those drivers last autumn has moved into the putting market. The principle is the same: a diamond insert in what otherwise would appear a fairly conventional putter. The benefits arise from the trueness of the putting stroke: many amateurs will know the feeling of releasing the putter on the downstroke and seeing the ball bobble slightly off the face of the putter, heading inexorably away from the hole. With the DR4E putter - and again, having played with this instrument, I can vouch for its effectiveness - the reduced friction between that diamond and the ball will ensure that the chances of hitting a straight line for the hole are hugely enhanced.

Clearly this sort of technology does not come cheap: much time and money has been expended in creating this new range of clubs, underlined by the parent company taking out a 16-year patent to ensure that rival manufacturers cannot steal a march on them by undercutting prices. The DR4E putter would set you back £350; true, this is not exactly a regulation price for a putter, but it is not the most expensive on the market. And one of golf's oldest clichés holds that you "putt for dough", as any golfer from hack to professional will confirm, making your choice of putter more important arguably than any other club in the bag.

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