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Golf balls

Slicing through the hype

Once upon a time, every golfer sank birdies. The game's first ball was made of a stout leather cover packed with boiled chicken or goose feathers and laced shut. The feathery, as it was nicknamed, was surprisingly heavy, never precisely round, and quite unreliable.

Six centuries later, the feathery's descendants might be the most highly engineered balls around. Last year, 27 million U.S. golfers spent \$763 million on golf balls that can travel farther, roll longer, and fly straighter than ever before. Precisely engineered dimple patterns on the ball's surface allow manufacturers to alter the ball's trajectory. (For more on golf-ball parts and the difference they make to your game, see [Anatomy of a golf ball](#).) More than a dozen manufacturers produce different models to address different players' needs.

Unfortunately, you can't tell which ball is best for you by its cover. Labels use the same words (long distance, soft feel) to describe what's inside. Some makers strive to set themselves apart using more creative copy with little clarity. Nike's Mojo II Karma ball, for example, is promoted as having "the psychokinetic energy of a tangerine dream squeezed into a 1.68-inch shimmering ball of fire." Yeah, but can it spin?

In short, selecting a ball today involves more than a quick stop at the local leathersmith. "It's so confusing, many players just buy the equipment that the people they play with like or their favorite pros use without taking into account the possibility that their choice may be hurting their game," says Michael Marion, director of golf at Promontory golf course in Park City, Utah, and Golf Digest's pick for Utah's top golf teacher. For example, beginners may not know enough about their games to determine whether they do better with a harder or softer type of ball.

To help you match a ball's performance to your game, we tested 25 balls for factors every golfer should weigh: how far they travel, how much they spin, how accurately they fly, and how they feel (how hard or soft they seem when you hit, chip, or putt them). For details on how we tested, see [The tests behind the Ratings](#). Our tests uncovered some results that run counter to widely held beliefs:

- You can buy balls that go the distance for less than \$20 a dozen. When hit by a machine that struck every ball with a driver with the same force and in the same spot, all the tested balls, regardless of construction or price, traveled virtually the same distance: 272 to 281 yards when hit at 110 mph, 227 to 235 yards when hit at 90 mph. In fact, three of the least-expensive models, the Dunlop Loco Dart (\$11 a dozen), the Top Flite XL Pure Distance More Carry (\$10), and the Pinnacle Gold Distance (\$13), went farther than 7 higher-priced balls. (Note: All the Top Flite balls we tested have since been discontinued but are still available at many retail locations.)
- By contrast, spin rates off an 8-iron varied from fair to excellent. We assigned higher scores to balls that spun the most. Most golfers prefer a ball that has a higher rate of spin off their irons; that way, they can have more control over the ball's path. Beginners shouldn't worry about buying expensive balls to enhance their spin rates. That's because experts say it's



DRIVE TIME Designs inside and out may vary, but all the golf balls we tested traveled similar distances.

more important for them to work on improving club head speed and contact to improve control.

- In some cases, we found that the less-expensive balls had a softer feel. Most golfers prefer this because harder balls will not be compressed as much when hit with the club face. Less compression results in less deformation of the ball, so less energy is produced when the ball reshapes in flight. This in turn produces a lower rate of spin. But feel may differ from golfer to golfer, so personal preference weighs heavily in your choice.
- Hit off a driver, each ball had a low spin rate, good news since that means a ball will fly on a straighter trajectory for more total distance down the fairway.
- The most-expensive balls were, however, the most accurate, landing closest to a target off both the driver and the 8-iron. But this consistency is likely to be of more benefit to a good player, because even the most accurate balls won't fix an average player's flawed swing.

CATEGORIES ARE MURKY

The balls we tested come from 10 leading manufacturers: Ben Hogan, Bridgestone/Precept, Callaway, Dunlop, Maxfli, Nike, Pinnacle, Titleist, Top Flite, and Wilson. The [Ratings](#) and [CR Quick Recommendations](#) provide guidance about the balls for different levels of play. Keep in mind that construction methods, cover materials, and dimple patterns differ at all price levels.

Pro-level balls cost the most (\$40 to \$45 per dozen) and are designed for professional golfers and very good amateurs. These balls use the latest advanced technology such as multilayer construction, "space age" materials, and complex dimple patterns. Midlevel balls cost about \$25 to \$35 a dozen. Most mimic the three-piece construction of most of the higher-priced balls, but their covers tend to be thicker for more durability. A few balls in this category were two-piece or featured low compression rates (for a softer feel) designed to lengthen the drives of players with slower swing speeds. The spin rates varied in our tests. Bargain-level balls, about \$10 to \$20 a dozen, tend to have two-piece construction and tout distance and durability, although some balls in this category may have the soft feel and spin rates common in higher-priced balls.

We did not test these golf balls for durability because there is no industry-defined standard. Assume that if the ball has a softer feel it is not as durable as those with harder covers. Playing experience dictates that every ball, whether soft or hard, will become damaged when hitting a cart path, tree, or bunker.

HOW TO CHOOSE

Here's how to find a ball that's compatible with your game, your home course, and your budget, based on our tests and advice from the experts:

Get fitted. Call a local golf club pro shop or golf retailer to find one with a "fitter," a staff member trained to analyze your swing, ask the right questions about your game, and figure out which ball and clubs match your skill level. If possible, go to a fitter who has a launch monitor, a system that uses a high-speed camera or radar to record your swing and measure nearly everything that happens near the point of impact, including launch angle (the angle at which the ball comes up off the club face), ball speed, ball spin rate, club-head speed, and the angle at which your club hits the ball. The optimum launch angle off a driver (about 13 to 15 degrees) and spin rate (2,200 to 2,800 rpms) are the tour pros' domain. "Try different balls off the launch monitor to see how different models can fine-tune your game," says Tom Mase, visiting associate professor at Michigan State University's School of Engineering and developer of five golf patents. Some shops will do a free fit; others charge \$50 to \$100.

Narrow the field. All the experts say there's no one ball that's best for every golfer, or even every type of golfer. With all the elements that go into a swing, and all the differences among golfers' skill levels, the choice is one only you can make. Our [Ratings](#) were based in part on a "best case" scenario in which the ball was hit by a robotic arm in the "sweet spot," or the middle of the club face, every time at a controlled angle and speed. Not even pros can swing as accurately, time after time, as the robot does.

That said, the [Ratings](#) are an excellent way to narrow your choices. Use them to pick several balls to test-drive. (Ask staff members in your pro shop whether they can lend you samples.) Check out events at your local driving range. Manufacturers' "demo days" at driving ranges are a good way to sample free balls. In choosing, don't obsess about distance: Our robot drove all the balls nearly the same length.

Assess your skill level. If you're a beginner, look among inexpensive balls with a soft feel. Accuracy and spin shouldn't matter as much.

If you're a midlevel player or higher, with a single-digit handicap, look among three- or four-

layer ("pro level") balls rated high for spin and accuracy. Those balls will perform best with a better player's high swing speed and good form.

Check the [CR Quick Recommendations](#). They provide guidance on specific balls that would be best for players with different skill levels.

Take your selection of balls and play a round with each. Use a range of clubs from driver to mid-iron to putter. This will give you an honest sense of how the ball will perform in different circumstances.

Other tips for trying out new balls:

- Use your own clubs. During our feel tests, we found that players who were given unfamiliar equipment became distracted and uncomfortable.
- Practice the same shot. For example, try putting the balls the same distance several times (we used 10 feet in our tests). Don't get caught up in the results of your putt, just how the ball feels off the putter.
- Listen. You may find the balls that sounded the loudest off the putter may also feel the hardest. You may want something softer for more control.

Consider the course. Do you play on one course much more than others? If so, factor in the characteristics of the course you play most often. If it has manicured, tightly mowed fairways and fast, firm greens, you might like a softer ball with plenty of spin like the Titleist Pro V1, the only ball we tested that earned an excellent score in both categories. A softer ball will spin more in the air, which causes it to roll less when it lands on a hard course. If you play a course with soft, slower greens, you may prefer a harder ball. Those tend to cost less because they often have fewer layers. All balls will stick when they hit thick grass.

Don't buy the hype. The Maxfli Noodle Long and Soft earned lower marks than several other models on both distance and soft feel; the Top Flite Long & Soft Distance earned top marks for distance but a low score for soft feel. "No matter what anyone else says about a ball, the bottom line is do you like to play with it?" says Dick Rugge, senior technical director of the United States Golf Association's test center, which tests manufacturers' equipment to make sure it follows required standards. Once you find a ball that meets your standards, your mere task, says Michigan State's Tom Mase, is to "keep them out of the water and on the right side of the fence."

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