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ISSUE



## GOLF IN THE KINGDOM

### The next big thing in golf could be the Tour Experience at Reynolds Plantation

By Michael Hiller

I don't know if Margaret Thatcher plays golf, but there's a story circulating about her early years as England's leader that suggests she would have had a knack for marketing golf equipment.

As the story goes, Ms. Thatcher had just finished a long day of meetings with her staff and senior officials, whom she easily intimidated. As a gesture of good will, Ms. Thatcher invited them all to dinner at a nearby restaurant. After a few minutes, the waiter approached and asked if they were ready to order.

"I will have the beef," said Ms. Thatcher.

"Of course," replied the young waiter. "And the vegetables?"

"They will have the beef, too."

Sounds a lot like the way golf retailers sell us golf equipment, doesn't it? We walk into a store, pick up a stock club, and buy whatever we've read or been told we need.

Without knowing for certain which combination of clubhead and shaft best suits our swing, we are, sadly, among the golf vegetables.

Think about it: Do you really have the same swing as everyone else playing that G10 or those X-20s?

Manufacturers build much of their equipment in a few basic iterations, and that's the way we usually buy it – right off the rack or right off eBay.

A handful of equipment companies, teaching academies and high-end retailers are trying to change that. They'll capture your swing on video or computer, then one of their staff members will analyze it and recommend head and shaft combinations that best fit your swing.

The problem, though, is the quality of those recommendations. Sometimes the data is faulty. More often, it's the data analysis that's wrong. Not all doctors have equal skills.

TaylorMade is taking a more exacting approach, and you're likely to be hearing a lot more about it.

Beginning in March, TaylorMade will open their Kingdom to people like you and me: a high-tech clubfitting, swing analysis and teaching facility usually restricted to their Tour pros. Called the Tour Experience, amateur golfers will receive three days of no-holds-barred intensive care for their golf game using

the same computer analysis and many of the same teaching staff that have been available only to Tour professionals and club pros. It all takes place at the new Kingdom at Reynolds Plantation, a 99-hole golf resort and residential development in Georgia, halfway between Atlanta and Augusta.

The Kingdom at Reynolds Plantation replicates the company's Kingdom at TaylorMade headquarters in Carlsbad, Calif. To gain access to that Kingdom, you'll still have to be a Touring player or a member of the TaylorMade pro staff. The new Kingdom will be less restrictive, but no less exclusive. Golf pros living east of the Mississippi won't have to fly to Carlsbad anymore. For us mortals, keys to this new Kingdom come at a princely sum: \$9,000.

"This is the Kingdom by invitation only," said Robin English, director of sports marketing for TaylorMade-adidas Golf.

Each week for 16 weeks, three to six golfers will stay at the elegant Ritz-Carlton at Reynolds Plantation for three nights and receive two full days of individual instruction, swing analysis and customized clubfitting by the same team that works with many TaylorMade-sponsored Tour pros. Charlie King, a *GOLF Magazine* Top 100 instructor, handles the instruction. Charles McLendon, a wizard at computerized swing analysis and a top-notch teacher, directs the clubfitting. All participants leave with new golf shoes, a golf shirt, wind shirt, hat, balls, glove, golf bag, and a 14-club set of golf clubs custom built on-site overnight. There's also a round of golf and a private dinner with a PGA Tour player (our pro was 2003 PGA Championship winner Shaun Micheel).

Recently, I had the opportunity to participate in a test-run of the Experience. I think it's the best three days you can spend if you're already a good player and you want to get better. Here's what you can expect if you go.

The first full day begins with a full-swing analysis and clubfitting in the same sophisticated performance laboratory TaylorMade uses to design and test new golf equipment, called MATT (Motion Analysis Technology by TaylorMade). It's rooted in the advanced motion capture technology used in computer-animated movies like "Lord of the Rings" and "Polar Express," and in your kids' EA Sports video games.

For the clubfitting, I slipped neoprene straps with reflective markers onto my head, chest, hands, knees and feet. I hit a dozen balls with both a driver and a 6-iron, to which they applied similar reflectors to the shaft and head. With each swing, nine separate high-speed synchronized cameras captured the motion of the reflectors and simultaneously produced a three-dimensional, real-time image of my swing. (The image was more of a silvery animatronic figure, faceless, with a chiseled muscular body. This eliminates the self-conscious feeling you always get when you watch yourself on video.) There it was, in full color: clubhead path, swing planes, speed planes, clubface orientation. Pressure sensors below my feet measured weight shifts. The monitor displayed color-coded vectors that clearly isolated the sequenced motion of my shoulders, hips, knees and spine.

You can view the entire swing from any angle (front, back, side,

above or below, and rotated as if someone was flying around you in a helicopter). Animated like this, there was nowhere for swing flaws to hide. (Later, King addressed a couple of these trouble areas with me on the range in an individual teaching session.)

The computer data revealed far more information about my swing and equipment than you could capture with a basic launch monitor and video camera.

For example, viewing the vectors on the monitor, there was no denying that my driver strikes the ball on a slight, but significant, downward angle (it should be an upward sweep). And though I square my clubface at impact, I'm losing distance by using a shaft that's too flexible for my swing. These elements combine to produce twice the ideal amount of ball spin, effectively robbing me of distance and control.

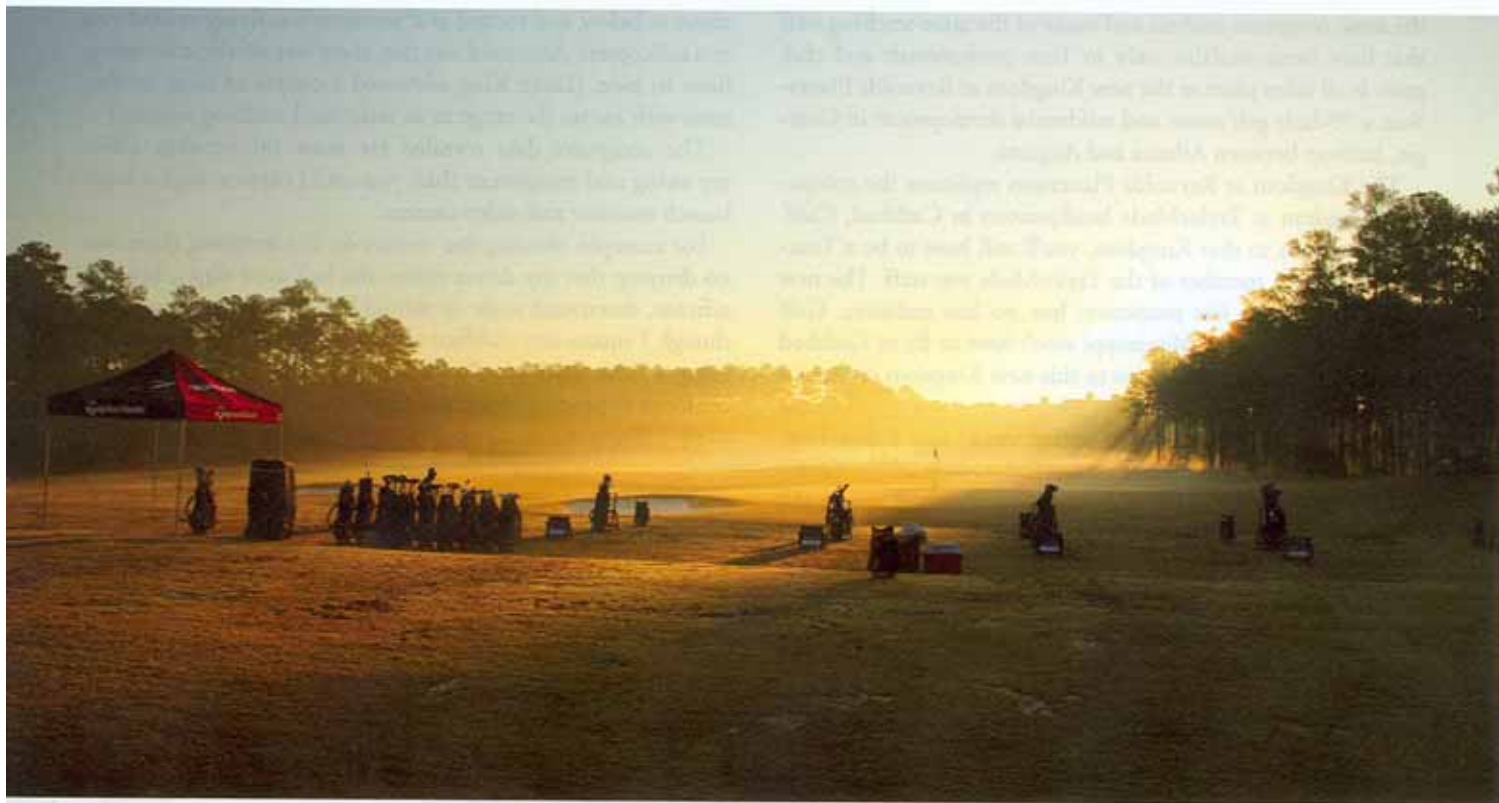


Within an hour, the MATT computer prescribed specific driver and iron combinations based on the data, and I headed out to the range with clubfitter McLendon to verify those picks.

McLendon reviewed the raw data, then watched me hit drives using different shaft and clubhead variations, beginning with MATT's recommendations. McLendon relied on a fancy \$30,000 phased-array Doppler radar system called TrackMan and on his experience fitting Tour pros and others to tweak both my swing and the shaft/driver combinations.

A dozen drivers later, McLendon had achieved his goal: a low ball spin rate of 2000 (2200 or less is ideal) and a ball flight arc that maximized my driving distance. While the heads were all TaylorMade products, the shafts were culled from many manufacturers. MATT and McLendon weren't far apart on the final choice. I squeezed an extra 20 yards from this new driver (the loft is lower and the shaft is stiffer than local pros had suggested) and a simple swing change.

All this whiz-bang technology can run amuck if knowledgeable humans do not properly interpret it. That's where the Kingdom excels. In fact, while the geeky stuff is a whole lot of fun, the strongest element of the Tour Experience is the interaction with the skilled clubfitters, clubmakers and instructors, all



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of whom had a natural, easy way of analyzing swings, repairing what's easily fixed, and then building clubs that maximize a player's existing skills.

They reinforced that during a short game skills assessment, where McLendon worked similar wizardry with my wedges. According to McLendon, most wedges are built with too much bounce, which manufacturers add to help poorer players get the ball in the air but which actually hinders crisp ball striking for better players.

He demonstrated this by having us hit 90-yard shots on impact boards, which leaves temporary marks on the clubhead where the head contacts the ground at the bottom of the swing. Sure enough, the club's sole hit the big ball (the earth) before the face struck the little ball (the golf ball), the opposite of good wedge play. McLendon handed me a 54-degree wedge with less bounce than my 56-degree iron (the bounce is the thick flange on the base of an iron that's supposed to keep the club from digging into the ground). The results were astonishing: the ball not only traveled farther in the air, which it is supposed to do, but the shot reached a higher apex and then spun backwards after it hit the green – something I'd never been able to do before. What a difference the right tools make. Who knew you could be fitted for wedges?

Since the Tour Experience doesn't officially debut until March, my visit was a preview of sorts, the first time the team had a chance to fit all the pieces together and see where the armor kinks. When the Experience launches this spring, participants will wake up on the second day to a bag of new clubs customized to their own swing specifications. They will have built the clubs overnight on site. Then, they devote the majority of the second day validating your club prescription and fine-tuning whichever clubs need adjusting. Additionally, King and his specialized team of instructors work with each golfer for a few hours on full swing, pitching and chipping.

One of the highlights of the Experience is getting to spend quality time with a PGA Tour professional that TaylorMade sponsors. It's just the six participants plus the pro, talking about whatever you want over breakfast, over a round of golf on the final day and over a private dinner in the clubhouse. Those conversations are more revealing than any interaction you might have with a player than during a pro-am.

Micheel hung out with us, but the specific Tour pro changes each session (David Toms, Hale Irwin and Kenny Perry are among those listed). Over a casual steak and lobster dinner with just him and us and a lot of really good wine, Micheel offered up candid details about his game (he's not been playing as well

as he thinks he should but still earned nearly a million dollars last year), pro-ams before Tour events (he likes them but thinks they shouldn't be compulsory), and equipment (other than getting custom-fit clubs, the best opportunity to improve will come from new ball technology). Try having that kind of discussion with a pro during a Tour event.

Is all this worth the price? If you're a better player seeking to eek out an extra 20 yards from your driver, crisp shots from your wedges, and you want knowledgeable golf experts to burrow deep into the mechanics of your golf swing to build high-performance custom clubs, then the answer is "yes." Throw in the interaction with a pro athlete who has your dream job – a PGA Tour pro – and the answer becomes, "hell yes."



In the end, the Experience proved to be a complete golf experience. It's more than a fitting, more than a golf school, a pro-  
am, a pampering vacation at a golf resort. It's all those things.

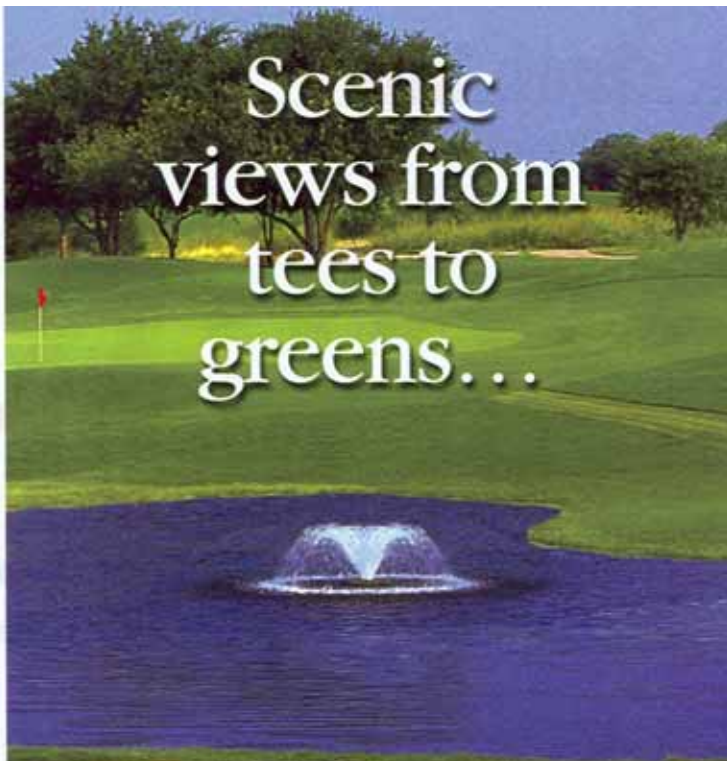
And I think it's the next big thing in golf.

**The Kingdom at Reynolds Plantation**  
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*Michael Hiller is a member of the Society of American Travel Writers and the Golf Writers' Association of America. He reviews restaurants for the Dallas Morning News and is contributing editor of AVIDGOLFER Magazine.*

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