



Frank Viola, vice president of the International Clubfitters Guild, works at his "Ace Of Clubs" shop in Saugus, Massachusetts.

Fit To Be Tried

Golf Tips Are Great, But You Need The Right Weapons For Par-Busting Battle

BY VIC WILLIAMS

Nine out of ten golfers play with clubs that simply don't fit their swings, body types, ages or levels of fitness. Most of them buy their sticks off the rack, play hand-me-downs from a relative or friend and hope for the best. They hang with older models as their bodies change and abilities shift. Even if coached by the best instructors they can find, they're definitely shoveling against the tide ... with the wrong shovel.

We've all heard that club fitting is vital to true game improvement, but organizations like the seven-year-old International Clubfitters Guild is out to make the fitting process as mainstream as power carts and GPS devices. Based in Greenwich, Connecticut, this society of 300 master fitters —

most of whom have gone through an arduous certification process — are versed in how to get every golfer they work with into the driver-through-putter version of a fine tailored suit.

"The main focus of our organization is to try to increase the skills of our members, and making the golfing public aware of how they would benefit from seeing a clubmaker-clubfitter," says Jacques Intriere, president of ICG and an avid clubfitter himself. I spoke with him in early October, a couple weeks after the guild held its European Chapter meeting at Fairmont St. Andrews in Scotland, which featured seminars by equipment companies and other sponsors — including one on the latest single-length iron fitting trend inspired by Bryson DeChambeau — plus "demo day" type demonstrations from FlightScope and Tour Edge and, yes, some golf on the resort's two excellent courses, the Kittocks and the Torrance. The gathering featured many of the organization's 75 or so Europe-based members, some of whom will no doubt make the trek to Orlando January 25-27 for the 2017 PGA Show, where ICG has a meeting room to check in with their members and welcome prospective fitters, including PGA teaching pros, into the fold.

"We're also at Demo Day with

TaylorMade, FlightScope and Mitsubishi Rayon," Intriere says. "Right now we have some PGA members in our organization — top 100 people. We're trying to educate them about clubmaking and clubfitting. If they're not going to do it they can at least work with a fitter in their area."

Whether card-carrying pro or freelance craftsman, we're talking serious artisans here, folks who have committed countless hours to building and fitting clubs for people who really care about dropping their handicaps with a combination of solid technique and tools built specifically for them using the latest swing analysis technology. Ask Intriere his methods for dialing in a client's proper measurements before he matches them with the right clubheads and shafts, cut and tweaked to the right angles, and he cites a couple of well-known systems that he's updated through the years, then moves into a semi-geeky riff on how he turns numbers into a feedback-packed experience.

"I first started fitting indoors in 1999 with a company called Swing Dynamics. It was a photograph-based launch monitor. I bought the second version. You'd hit the ball, the camera would flash and it would take three pictures of a ball. You had a line through the ball so you could measure ball speed, launch angle. The second version was built more on tilt-spin or tilt-axis. But folks didn't like the flash. So I found these beautiful simulators from what's now HD Golf. It actually measures real spin, angle of attack, face angles and paths. What [current industry leaders] Trackman or FlightScope will do is estimate path and face angle based on the spin — backspin, sidespin or tilt axis — and it might not be real because the guy might not be aiming right. So fitting indoors has actually gotten better."

He can even reproduce almost-real playing conditions thanks to a library of "tens of thousands" of high-def photos of courses. "When I do a fitting for a 6-iron, and you're hitting it 160, I might

recommend a club with more speed, hotter face and longer coefficient time on the face, so I'll take him out to a golf hole, a virtual target, like the 17th at Medinah, 171 over water. I'm giving him a virtual target. I have him hit his club, then the club I think is best for him. The dispersion is less, he's hitting more greens. I'm not on a range, but it's almost like I'm on the course with him. Then once we have the driver fitted I'll take him out to Bethpage or Pacific Dunes, give him a tighter or wide-open hole so they can get real idea of how they're hitting the ball in a controlled environment. I also have the SAM Putt Lab for putters. So we have a lot more data to do our fittings with."

That's great, but the raw digital story isn't enough. You need the human element, too. "To get a real good clubfitting you need an analyst," Intriere continues. "We learn a lot by talking for

"The interesting thing is, with new equipment, there's not a trade-off. With irons, such as the new Steelhead from Callaway which has the cup face in every iron and a lot of perimeter weighting, at the same loft you can get four or five more miles an hour club speed, and a higher MOI head. A lot of people come in and have the wrong shafts, the wrong lengths, the wrong lie angle, the wrong category of game improvement. You put them into a more appropriately fitted length and total weight, and give them these new high-speed heads, and they're hitting it farther and straighter."

There's an equipment deficiency for a lot of people if they have older clubs. "I think drivers are for the most part way too long," Intriere says. "Most of mine are 44, 45 inches long. If you get a guy who's 70 years old who hits every fairway, you can put him into a lighter but still stable shaft, not have to cut the club down, and he's going to hit the center every time."

Speaking of club length, Intriere has mixed feelings about the single-length iron trend, which has now led Cobra to go mainstream with it.

"I think I've done one set, but on the other hand, a guy from France has done 82 sets of those Sterling irons. If you were to survey ICG members, probably only fewer than 10 percent have had significant success with them.

"I did a set of PXGs for a player. I was able to play around with the weights to get every head to weight same. To get the length and lie angle the same isn't an issue. He really liked it, a tall guy — we did everything at a 7-iron length that was a half or three-quarters inch over. He's had a lot of success with it."

Many of Intriere's clients are older, which leads him to fitting them with wedges and short irons that are longer than standard. "I try to figure out the shortest length at which they can be athletic, maintain spine angle. They have trouble reaching the ball in an athletic position. Seniors do much better



with longer short irons, since they just can't maintain that pro posture."

Of course, ill-fitted sticks don't discriminate by age. "Ninety percent of golfers don't have the right equipment in terms of set makeup, shafts and weights. If they're a 28 handicap, it's pretty easy to get them to a 21.

"I also see a lot of mis-fit putters in terms of having the wrong structure. Most putters are too light; the trend now is to start to put backweighting into putters, 40 or 50 grams, but that's not enough. I'm 90s, 110, even 140s. It's amazing. It's really the only way you can improve the golfer's mechanics right away.

"In terms of what is a good clubfitter, the questions I would ask are: 'How much time do you spend with me? Is there an interview? Is there a launch monitor?' If there's no interview, and the guy's not spending an hour our hour and a half on an iron fitting, hour on a driver, half hour to 45 minutes on a putter — they don't all have to be done at one time — that's probably not going to be a good fitting.

So, how to track down a certified ICG fitter in your area? "We have a club-maker locator on our website," says Intriere. "Go to the members' Google point and can get some information about them. The more established clubfitters have their own sites. Our certification process is very involved for both clubmaking and clubfitting. We're fairly new, and we've got some good people who aren't certified yet. We're trying to get everybody on board." **GT**

For more information, visit www.clubfittersguild.org.

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20 or 30 minutes, what their problems are, what their playing goals are, what they expect from a change in equipment. We spec out the current clubs, their average playing history, and that gives us clues to what's good or bad about it, and that saves time once we get to the fitting. For instance, if a guy's playing a Rocketballz [iron], and he hits a flyer shot every time — 'I hit the ball low, and when it hits the green it doesn't stay on' — well, he's playing a head that's designed to do that. It goes a long way, but let's focus on heads that will get more spin and trajectory."

Of course, impact is the moment of truth, which in golf terms means "moment of inertia" or MOI. Intriere takes special care to get that element dialed, too.

"When I MOI match a set, I figure out what are the best specs for a 6-iron and MOI that, and that gets us the irons. It's possible the woods would be the same, it's possible they won't. But I would find the best 6-iron for them traditionally. Then I would build the set based on that.