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Illegal new driver has torn a rift in the honorable world of golf

Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

"I haven't even hit it yet and my friends are complaining," says Gregg Jarrell of his new ERC II driver. "They say it's illegal, that it's banned on the (PGA) Tour. I said we're not on the Tour. I told them to go buy one and leave me alone."

By RICK WOODSON

Gregg Jarrell and William Schwert are friends. They both live in Pittsford. Both are professors at the University of Rochester's William E. Simon Graduate School of Business.

And they share a love for the game of golf. They are both members at Irondequoit Country Club, where they may or may not continue to be golf buddies as well. You see, Jarrell and Schwert are 180 degrees apart in the great debate over the use of Callaway Golf Co.'s ERC II driver. They will tell you it is not a heated disagreement, but a disagreement nonetheless.

Jarrell says he plays only match play and rarely knows his total score after a round of golf. He says he has no registered handicap at Irondequoit CC. Schwert, though, who has a 14 handicap, appears to be more of a stickler for strict adherence to the Rules of Golf.

Their disagreement is a microcosm of a heated debate that is raging from sea to shining sea and beyond over Callaway's ERC II, which retails from $499 and up.

The club has been judged to be "nonconforming" by the United States Golf Association, the game's ruling body in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The ERC II's clubface is thinner than traditional drivers, thus creating a springlike effect when the ball is struck. The USGA has ruled, therefore, that the ERC II is illegal and anyone who uses the club is as guilty of breaking the rules as a golfer who kicks the ball from the rough into the fairway.

The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, Scotland, golf's governing body everywhere except in North America, has accepted the ERC II as a legal club.

Jarrell's wife, Lynne, gave him an ERC II for his 49th birthday last month. Schwert more or less says he has no intention of putting an ERC II in his bag.

"I haven't even hit it yet and my friends are complaining," Jarrell says. "They say it's illegal, that it's banned on the (PGA) Tour. I said we're not on the Tour. I told them to go buy one and leave me alone."

Jarrell says he is hooked on Callaway drivers and always buys the latest model.

Schwert, meanwhile, mentions using one ball from tee to green and bringing out a new ball for putting. He mentions players who hit a ball out of bounds and instead of returning to the tee, as the rules dictate, merely drop another ball where the first one went OB. He wonders where such malpractice ends.

"What is the role of rules in golf?" he asks.

Jarrell simply shrugs and says, "If it's good enough for Arnold Palmer, it's good enough for me."

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Ah, yes, Arnie. Palmer, perhaps the most popular golfer in history, has put himself smack dab in the middle of this controversy—and, in the path of an avalanche of harsh criticism when last October he endorsed the controversial club. Palmer does not disagree with banning the club's use in official competition, but he supports its use in recreational play.

Palmer says if the ERC II increases a casual golfer's enjoyment of the game by increasing the length of his tee shots, then what is the big deal? He says that is a positive, not a negative.

"There's not any threat to the game whatsoever by hitting the ball farther," Palmer says in an Associated Press story. "I think we should focus on people having fun playing golf."

However, Arnie has no army supporting him on that one. Far from it. *Golfweek* reports that when Palmer was asked in an interview if his endorsement of the ERC II driver was not tantamount to an endorsement of cheating, he said, "Would you like to rephrase that? If not, then I think we've reached the end of this conversation."

And, there also is considerable doubt about whether the ERC II actually helps the average player hit the ball farther.

"I don't believe that for the average amateur player it helps them at all," says Christopher DeVincentis, head professional at Big Oak Driving Range and Golf Shop in East Rochester. "I went to a PGA teaching/coaching summit in January and Bob Bush was there—he's a former technical director for True Temper (golf club shafts). He said the bottom line is that unless you swing over 110 mph and hit it dead center, you're not going to get anything out of it all."

Callaway disputes that claim. Richard Helmstetter, Callaway's senior executive vice president and chief of new products, told *Golfweek* that tests show the ERC II does benefit average golfers. He reports that Callaway tested 37 golfers prior to releasing the club and that 29 of them hit their tee shots farther, and eight did not.

The group, according to Callaway, included golfers with club-head speed ranging from a very slow 60 mph to 117 mph, which is PGA Tour speed. Improvement in distance, the company said, varied from three yards up to 20 yards.

While some golf equipment retailers are pushing the ERC II, others, Big Oak included, are getting a less than enthusiastic response to the club.

"In terms of sales, it's not doing good at all," DeVincentis says. "It's certainly not something we promote, necessarily, because you're looking at $500 retail, and how many people are going to come in who can afford something like that, even if they want it? Plus, it's obviously a nonconforming club. Whether it should be or shouldn't be doesn't matter; it is nonconforming."

There have been predictions that the ERC II would become the hottest item in golf shops across the nation. Edwin Watts, who owns a chain of shops by the same name, told the Associated Press that the controversial club "will be the shot in the arm the golf business needs."

Perhaps, but it is not an issue to Jim Lucius, director of golf at the Olympic Club in San Francisco, host of four U.S. Opens. Lucius was quoted saying in *Golfweek*: "I think these drivers are absolutely like kicking sand in the face of our ruling body. Not only will I not sell them, I will not acknowledge them."

The broader issue brought to the forefront by the ERC II debate is where does golf, and the people who play it, draw the line regarding rules. Proponents of the game, especially in competition, take great pride in the fact that golf is an honor-system sport—that is, when players inadvertently violate a rule, even if they alone are aware of it, they penalize themselves.

That said, many golfers bend the rules, if not out and out ignore them. To wit: Many do not adhere to the rule that says if you tee off on the first hole with one brand of ball, you are not allowed to change to another ball. And many golfers carry more than the legal limit of 14 clubs in their bags.

"To us, there's one set of rules, and the first rule of golf is that you play by the rules," says David Fay, executive director of the USGA. "It doesn't matter if it's kindergarten dodge ball or golf. You have to have rules, and someone has to set them."

Callaway, in an advertisement in the March 2001 issue of *GolfWorld* magazine, says "ERC II Drivers Conform" and then in smaller print, "to the Rules of Golf everywhere in the world except for the U.S., Canada and Mexico." Further, the ad lists seven professional tournaments, from Dubai to Singapore to Australia, in which the ERC II was the overwhelming choice of the players.

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None of which changes anything in the United States or Rochester. DeVincentis insists there is no way the Rochester District Golf Association would allow the ERC II to be used in its tournaments.

"In the District, you have no chance (to use the club)," DeVincentis says. "Right now, this second, the RDGA will not allow that club. I know that. If you're playing by the Rules of Golf, that club is not legal; you cannot use it."

DeVincentis notes that there are instances when local rules may allow players to tap down spike marks when the putting surfaces are in poor condition, but, he adds, "There is no such thing as a local rule where you can just say, 'We're not going to play by the Rules of Golf today.'

"If I were playing against you and you said, 'I'm going to use my ERC,' I'd say, 'That's fine. I'm going to tap down spike marks.' You'd say, 'That's illegal,' and I'd say, 'Well, you're using a club that's illegal.' It's real simple."

Jarrell agrees, sort of. "Who knows how I'll hit it?" he says. "But if I like it, I'll play it," he says, "and if they don't like it, they can go play with somebody else. I don't see it as a big advantage. If my drives go farther, that means they'll go farther out of bounds. When I said I wanted one, I wasn't thinking what other people would say."

Still, Schwert has his reservations about the upcoming season. "Suppose last year we were reasonably close (off the tee)," he says, "and this year he is 20 yards ahead of me and the only difference I see is the change in equipment. That's when this becomes an awkward situation."

He adds, though, "If it's recreational golf, I don't care."

A lot of golfers—and the golf organization that counts—do care, however.

Rick Woodson is a Rochester Business Journal columnist and free-lance writer.