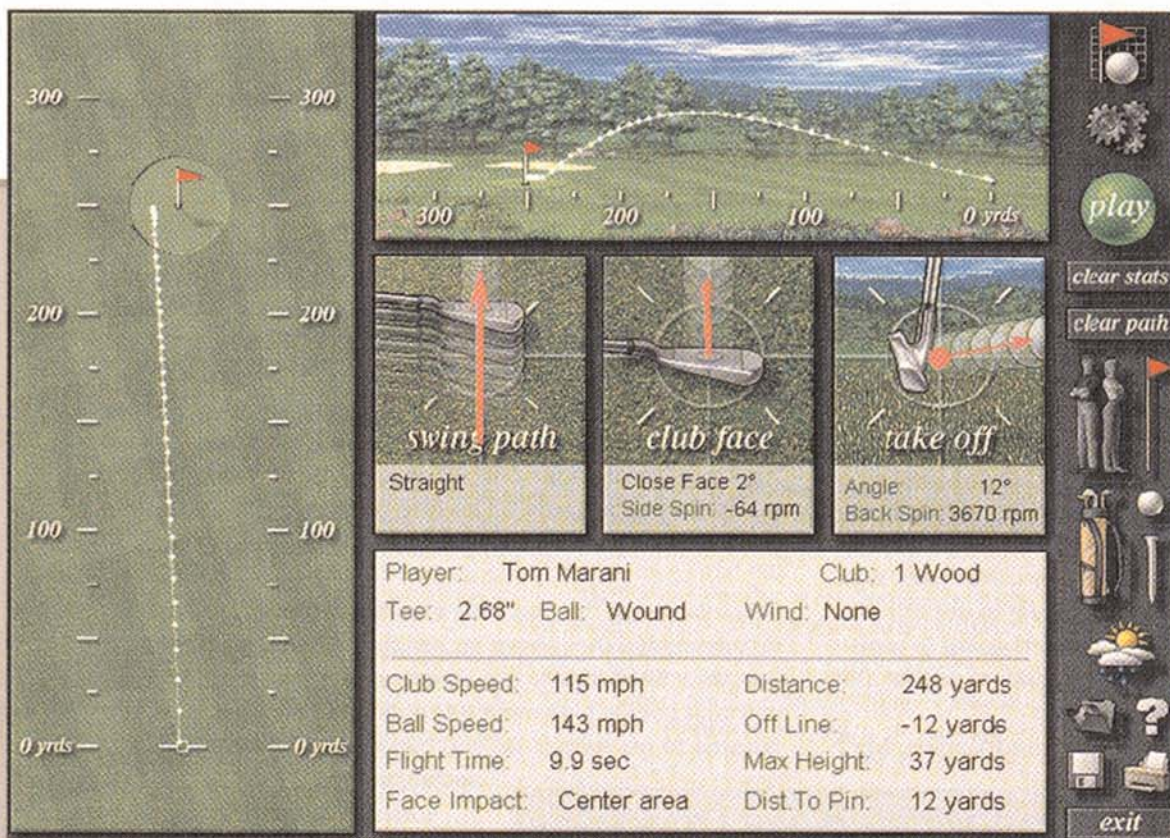


2002 PREVIEW Smart Gear



A High-Tech Snapshot of the Swing

Here's a look at the kinds of information a launch monitor provides. These graphics are from Focaltron's GolfAchiever, a laser-based analyzer used by some 300 clubfitters and by such top teaching pros as Chuck Cook and Jim Suttie. (Titleist's monitor is currently available only to its tour pros and select groups of golfers.)

At left is data from a driver

I NEEDED NEW CLUBS. WELL, I DIDN'T ACTUALLY need them; my old clubs were perfectly healthy. But I *needed* them, if you know what I mean.

I had been fitted for my old clubs seven years ago by the experts at Slazenger, and I've played my best golf ever with those clubs, getting down to about a 5-handicap.

But after seven years, a man needs new clubs, and Titleist's East Coast test facility is just a couple of hours down the road from our offices here at Golf Digest, so I recently asked them if they would fit me for a new set.

My fitting was state-of-the-art, its most memorable element a device called a launch monitor. In essence, it's a high-speed camera that when hooked up to a suitcase-size computer captures the first moment of impact and then extrapolates the distance, direction and trajectory of the

ball. It's pricey technology that is just now becoming available to golfers outside the elite ranks. (See sidebar, above.) But someday you too will be fitted with a launch monitor. Let me tell you: If you want to hit it longer and straighter, it is the only way to go.

My fitting was presided over by Fordie Pitts, who tours the country in Acushnet's "Science Van" teaching club pros how to fit clubs. He also works with Titleist's tour players. I was in good hands—the same hands that help Brad Faxon and other tour pros find the right clubs.

The first hour or so of my fitting involved irons, and it was pretty much like the fitting I had seven years ago. Fordie would hand me a 5-iron, I'd hit a couple of balls with it, we'd watch the ball flight. Occasionally, I'd hit a club off a lie board, which tells you if your club is too upright, too flat, or just right. I hit a lot of 5-irons. Mostly we'd just watch ball flight, and he'd ask me how the club felt. Finally, Fordie settled on the clubhead model and shaft I hit best and we moved to the driver.

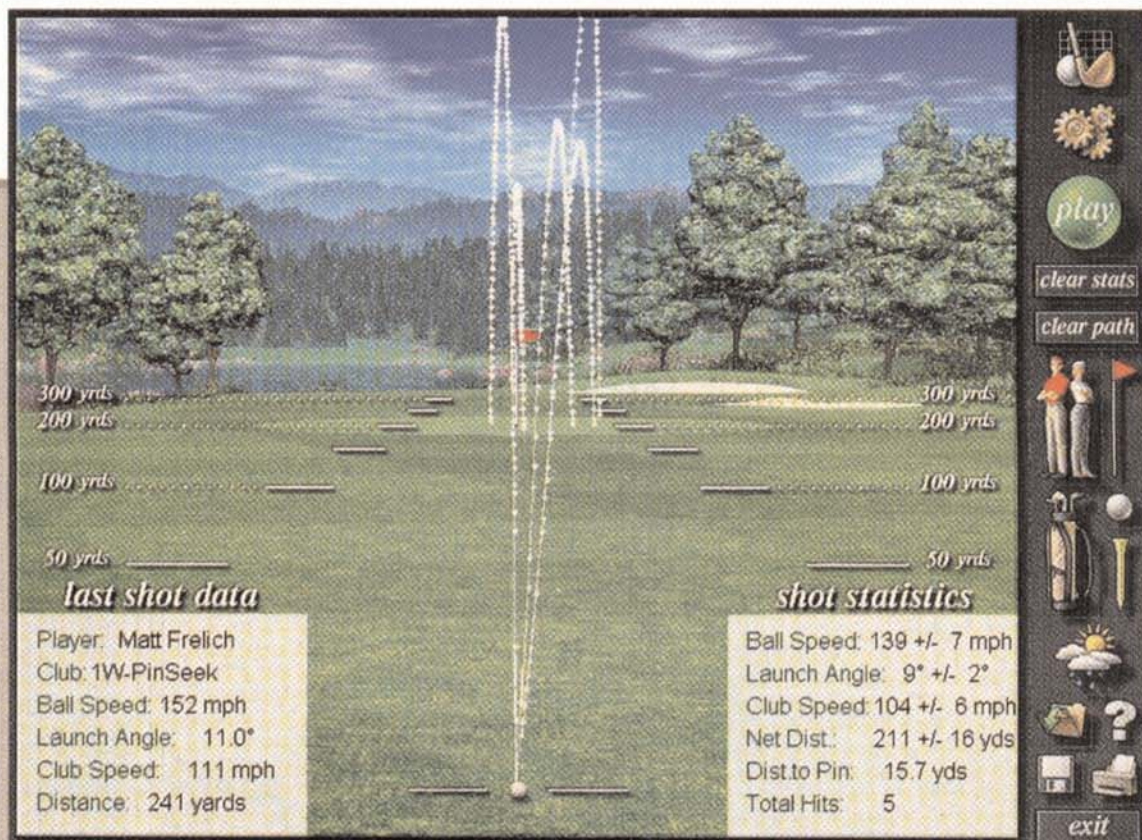
As with the irons, Fordie kept handing me drivers and I kept hitting them. But now Fordie consulted the launch monitor.

A launch monitor tells you the three key conditions of your ball instantly after impact:

How I Got Launched

swing of a scratch golfer: His swing speed is 115 mph, with a slightly closed clubface that results in a gentle draw. The 12-degree launch angle is near spot-on for maximum distance. Switching from a wound ball to a lower-spinning solid-core ball would probably reduce initial ball spin and increase carry distance.

At right is another set of driver swings, shown from down-the-line. This big hitter has an average launch angle of about 9 degrees, resulting in slightly less carry distance. (For more information about the GolfAchiever, go to www.golfachiever.com.)



(1) its velocity, (2) its launch angle—i.e., its initial upward angle off the clubface—and (3) its backspin rate. With the launch monitor, Fordie could tell instantly whether I had achieved the high-launch, low-spin, boring ball flight that would maximize my distance off the tee.

Fordie told me that my initial ball speed off the driver at the start of the fitting was about 145 mph. The average tour pro's initial ball speed is about 160 mph. My launch angle was 11 to 12 degrees—slightly lower than optimum. My backspin rate was 3,000 rpm—too high by about 500 rpm. I hoped new clubs would help me do better.

An important aside: During this fitting, Fordie had me hitting the Pro V1 ball, which is designed to spin less off the driver. In other words, it was not just me being fitted to the clubs, *but me and the ball and the clubs all being fitted together.*

For a range rat like me, this kind of fitting is heaven. I just kept hitting drivers as Fordie put them in my hands—steel or graphite, standard or offset, firm flex or soft flex.

Finally, Fordie narrowed the drivers down to three, and I hit a few more balls with each of them. Then it was over.

To my surprise, we found that I did best with S-flex graphite-shaft irons, a half-inch long and 4 degrees flat. Four degrees flat? That seemed odd, since I'd been told my previous clubs were 2 degrees upright. Fordie checked the lie angles of my old 5-iron and my new 5-iron and discovered that they both had the same specs. In other words, what was

Someday you too will be fitted with a launch monitor. If you want to hit it longer and straighter, it's the only way to go.

4 degrees flat for one club company was 2 degrees upright for another! There is little standardization in the world of golf clubs.

Fordie also told me that I did best with an S-flex graphite-shaft, 45-inch, 10.5-degree driver. This driver gave me a higher launch angle and lower spin rate than my old driver, even though it had the same loft written on the bottom.

My club-fitting took about two hours. (A normal fitting takes about 45 minutes.) In that two hours, Fordie and the launch monitor helped me cut at least two strokes off my average score.

Now if I could just finagle a trip out to Titleist's West Coast operations, where I hear Scotty Cameron has this state-of-the-art putter-fitting studio . . .

Ed Weathers