What recession? It certainly wasn't evident at the world's largest golf show in Florida earlier this year when 53,000 industry professionals turned up to view the offerings of some 1,500 exhibitors. Mel Cheskin went to review a sport torn between its traditional roots and modern day expansion into the electronic age. Technology is winning. In all aspects of the game from hard goods to apparel, shoes to hats and clubs to balls, space-age materials are leading an already healthy industry further into controversial technological changes.



Photo: Courtesy ECCO

Golf - alive and well in Florida

'The club shall not be substantially different from the traditional and customary form and make'. Well that rule doesn't seem to deter manufacturers of woods, irons, wedges and putters from testing and marketing variously sized club heads, shaft lengths or composite materials. The latest company to join Sonartec, Cleveland, Callaway, Precept and TaylorMade, et al, in the quest to hit the ball longer and more accurately with a stick is none other than the heavyweight of the sport's world - Nike. And with names like David Duval and 'The Tiger' alongside, it's a pretty safe bet that Nike will have an impact.

The company is touting its new driver with its reinforced smaller-tip-diameter graphite shaft as the next technological break-through in long distance clubs. The driver, with its forged instead of cast head, is made from a special composition of beta titanium materials and manufactured with an extensive series of precision steps. It is important to note that Nike emphasise that it is a combination of its technologies that produces the extra ball speed, thus reducing backspin and increasing ball distance. Forging, for example, allows the use of a special beta titanium material giving the face of the club a uniform grain structure, which helps make it thinner, stronger and lighter. This gives it a much greater trampoline or rebound effect than the face of a cast driver. Nike's drivers are made in 275cc and 350cc versions. Nike claims that that ball speed can be increased from 171.9 mph to 177.72 as measured on David Duval's drive, who is currently ranked No.3 on the official world ranking list. Rumour has it that Tiger, who is currently using Titleist clubs, will be using the Nike's new entry by year-end. The accompanying wedges are also forged. They have thin top lines, minimal offset and come in four lofts: 53, 56, 58 and 60 degrees.

Attempts to limit club size and length corresponds to the "dimple race" on balls, where a 336-dimple design has given way to smaller, increased volume dimpled ball with as many as 812 dimples. What is interesting is that the game's governing body, the Royal & Ancient, based in St. Andrews, has been very relaxed about the introduction of new technologies in clubs and balls but this laissez-faire attitude has been worrying the US Golf Association, the game's watchdogs in the USA. However, a compromise on a single set of rules governing golf equipment in professional tournaments seens to have been reached.

Extending golf courses, to counter technology, for the likes of the top 50 professionals in the world is killing the game for the ordinary golfer. One only had to see the extended Augusta golf course at this year's Masters to appreciate the impact of technology on an ancient game.

But enough techno-speak.

Moving on to the softer or apparel side, performance fabrics complement style, fashion and the colour palate, to create a technologically superior clothing side for today's golfer. Whether it's moisture control on the inside or weatherproofing on the outside, the story is all about technically advanced fabrications. Nano-Tex in conjunction with Burlington Industries has introduced the fourth in its Nano technology series - Nano-Touch to the golf world. In addition to Nano-Dry, Nano-Pel and Nano-Care, already on the market, Nano-Touch enhanced fabrics claim to create the ultimate in luxurious performance by combining the best of cotton-like and synthetic properties. The foundation of strength and durability is wrapped with the feel of cotton comfort, offering luxurious softness in a durable fabric. The other nano technology treatments in addition to moisture management, breathability and quick drying properties, add a

superior water and oil repellency to polyester, nylon and cotton twill. Brands such as Lee and Eddie Bauer are already using nano-treated fabrics in some garments.

Seattle-based Rivers West has its newest H2P fabric. The H2P mirco Fleece and H2P Rain Skin are the lightest weight, softest H2P fabrics to date. As rugged and durable as the rest of the H2P family of fabrics, both are soft and drapable and 100% waterproof and insulating. Rivers West debuted a full line of jackets, vests, pants and accessories in the H2P micro Fleece and H2P Rain Skin in Orlando. Its Soft-Shells are packable, lightweight and are a complete weatherproof system in and of themselves.

The Weatherproof Garment Company's 2002 line is heavy on microfibre jackets and shells. With various linings such as high count brushed 100% cotton poplin, quilted satin and zip-out microfleece, this Bay Shore NY company combines synthetics with natural fibres to provide an extensive range of fashion with function outerwear. CDN Spirit's Golfwear line from Canada features waterproof outerwear in Ultra Twill Microfibre that is a tightly woven soft fabric - water repellent, windproof, breathable, durable and lightweight. CDN also offers the same qualities as Microfibre but sueded in a fabric called Peached Microfibre to give a super soft hand feel. What better to promote that "warm and fuzzy feeling" for golfers while offering protection on wet and windy course? For cold weather golfing it has garments made from Highland Fleece, a high performance fabric offering superior protection from the cold while adjusting naturally to fluctuations in body temperatures. Highland Fleece is also anti-pilling, quick drying and breathable. To complete the high-tech package CDN has windshirts and jackets with Entrax - a lightweight nylon tricot fabric laminated with a high precision monolithic membrane of hydrophilic polyurethane, which is waterproof and breathable.

Nike is promoting Dri-FIT technology in an attempt to give its new clothing line feature brand recognition. Dri-FIT treated fabric pulls moisture away from the skin for rapid evaporation. The Greg Norman Collection has expanded its PlayDry moisture wicking technology into 60 percent of the company's total knit business and into a complete outerwear line, including jackets and windshirts for Fall 2002. Izod Club's version of moisture management is called Links Tech. Branching out from its solid men's polos into patterns, prints and jacquards Izod use Links Tech in Microfibre and Micropima cotton styles.

Major shoe brands FootJoy, Nike and Adidas are now offering sizeable ranges of hose to complement their footwear. [The USGA, the controlling amateur body for golf in the States, has officially banned the use of metal spikes in its tournaments and, with few exceptions, almost every golf club has done the same. The strange thing is that Tiger Woods and by far the majority of the leading professionals use metal spikes. The latest innovations in soft spikes is a trend towards a more pliable softer, lower profile version of the original and the 'quarter-turn' locking system for easy changing and cleaning. Gore-Tex is still a desired breathable, waterproof upper feature offered by many brands. Cotton is still the fibre of choice used in lower priced hose, usually with a 20 percent polyester blend. Performance socks blend synthetic fibres such as acrylic, stretch nylon and Lycra for faster drying and wicking qualities. Euro from Italy is a new entry into the technically superior sock market. Offering a full range of under ankle, ped, quarter, crew and over-the-calf heights, Euro offers sport specific socks for a full complement of sports including golf. Using state-of-the-art fibre blends such as MicroSupreme high tech acrylic, CoolMax, Thermolite and Amicor Plus, combined with sport specific padding and ribbing, Euro seems to have the manufacturing knowledge to impress the high tech golf enthusiast.

Hats and caps are an industry unto themselves for golf. (See article on page 31.)

Waist belts are not only a popular dress item in fashion but are almost a standard in the golfing world too. Leather is still the predominant material used and preferred by most manufacturers. As in headgear selection, an endless variety of braided, embossed, exotic, sueded and smooth leathers were to be seen in Orlando. Another part of belt construction is the metal buckles, keepers and tips used to trim and fasten the leather. Most innovative recent introduction comes from another Canadian company - Landes in Quebec that offered stretch leather (over rubber) for adjustable fit and comfort.

Not to be overlooked in golf accessories is eyewear. This is a product category dominated by smaller specialised brands. Only Nike dares to encroach into the area of reflections, distortions and peripheral light. Best of the specialised brands in Orlando was Nyx with its Golf Vision System, which consists of three interchangeable lenses providing 100 percent UVA/UVB protection. Other major brands targeting golf are Oakley, Lantis, Scheyden and Polareyes. From head to toe, in wet or hot weather, driving for distance or simply controlling a putt, the PGA Merchandise Show in Orlando still provides a vision of things to come.