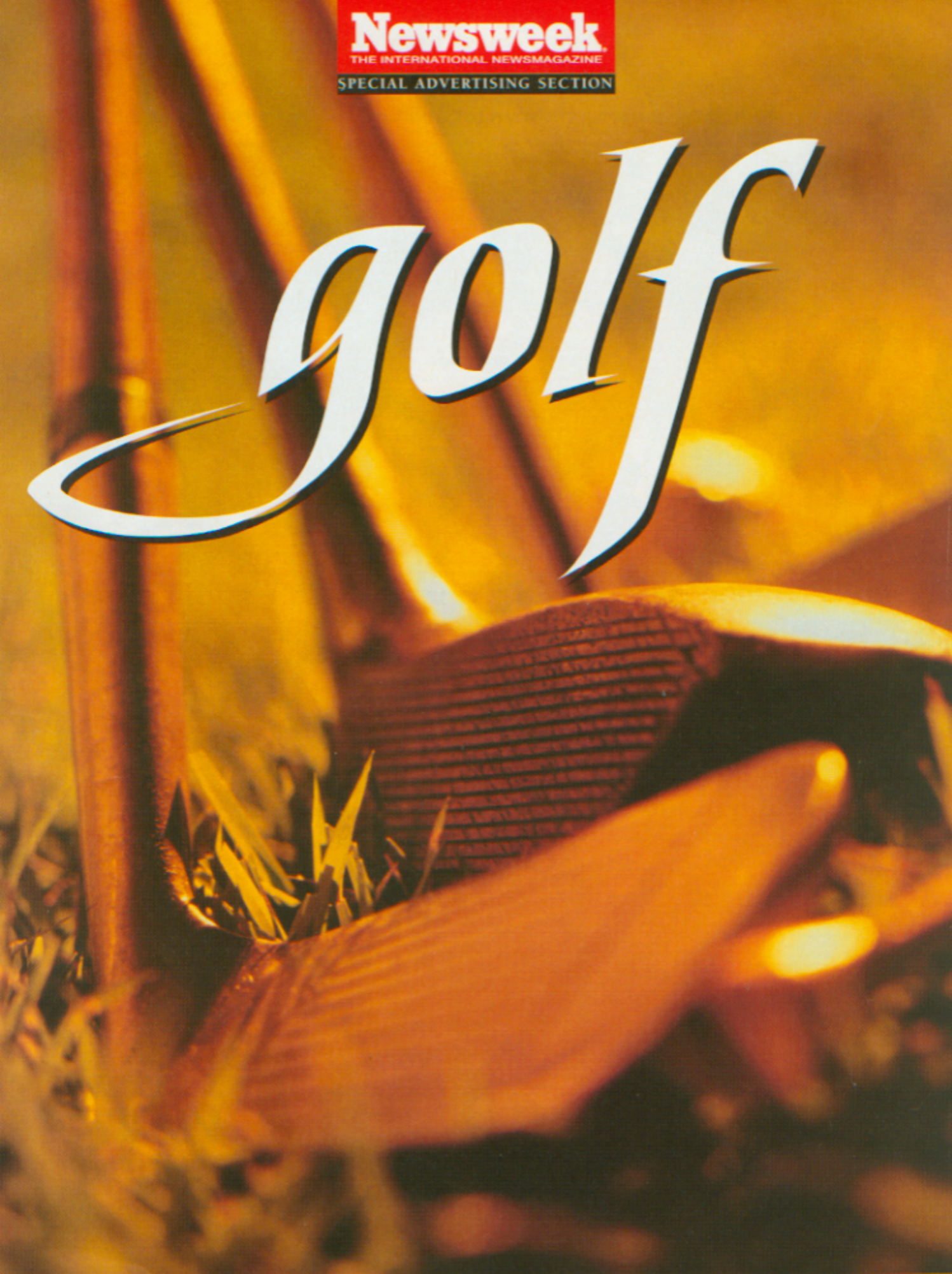


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golf





Gonzo For Gizmos

By Jason Forsythe

To outsiders, golf is one of the world's most low-tech games. Nothing to it: strike a walnut-size ball with a club until it falls into a hole in the ground. And indeed, when golf clubs were made of hickory and golf balls were leather stuffed with feathers, it was

No longer. Golf courses today are high-tech playgrounds, and equipment and training devices—from yardage-calculating binoculars to laser-driven swing analyzers—have become ultimate toys for adults.

"Golfers buy equipment like they buy jewelry—only this is the kind of jewelry you can play



QLink Pendant: Achieving a competitive edge

with," says Scott Smith, senior equipment editor for Golf Digest. "Golf is a simple sport, but any time you try to do something simple with precision to reach an elusive goal, sophisticated tools can help."

Consistency is the most elusive and maddening part of the game, driving players to seek instant help—either in the pro shop, at the 19th hole or on the Web—in hopes of avoiding the drudgery of daily practice.

"Everyone is looking for some little secret that will unravel the mystery of the game, and solve the inconsistency that keeps plaguing them," says Gary Wiren, founder and chairman of Golf Around the World, a golf learning and training-aids company.

The high-tech golf boom is driven by emulation of the pros as seen on television. Amateurs demand the same statistics at their fingertips that the pros use. Already, high-tech golf carts come equipped with satellite Global Positioning System (GPS), which tells golfers how far the ball is lying from the hole.

The hottest golf gadget coming on the market this summer is a wrist-top computer with an embedded GPS. The G9 "personal golf instrument," built by Suunto, the Finnish sports-watch manufacturer, allows golfers on specially equipped courses to measure individual shot distances, as well as record which club they used—and then download all the data for later analysis on a home computer. Besides golf software, the G9 also includes a barometer, thermometer, altimeter and a 3-D compass.

Anything goes, to achieve a competitive edge. The QLink Pendant is a microchip worn around the neck that is said to help align a golfer's personal magnetic field.

Golfers can also arm themselves with a mind-numbing array of training aids on the practice range. Dane Wiren, president and CEO of golfttrainingaids.com, reviews more than 500 new golf training tools and mechanical learning devices a year. Most training aids are not legal for competition—but can be used with a player's own clubs to perfect a swing.

The PUTTron helps putters align their club face perpendicular to the hole, while the high-speed gyroscopic cradle on Check-Go's Sweet Spot Finder marks the perfect spot to hit the ball for the crispest putt or the longest flight off the tee.



PUTTron: For perfect alignment



ProLink's high-tech golf cart: Sporting a GPS

Other practice aids have golfers attaching lasers to the butt of their club, and then following the path of the laser beam as they make their back swings. Dual laser systems attach to the shaft of the club as well as the butt of the club.

For the ultimate in golf training entertainment, GolfTek offers a dozen 18-hole golf courses and video swing-analysis system—all in the comfort of your home. The \$36,500 LSGolf Simulator System lets players take full swings at their ball, hitting it into a net with the image of a well-known golf course superimposed. Instant statistics of club-head speed, ball velocity and swing tempo are calculated and displayed as the video image of the ball you just hit careers down the video fairway—or dribbles off into the rough.

With the cost of a new carbon-composite driver hovering in the \$500 range, and a new set of irons costing well into the \$1,000s, there is a good deal of money to be made in the golf marketplace.

But do the gizmos work? "People might spend \$500 on the latest and greatest driver, but if they are a 20-handicap, most do not have the skill to hit that driver any better than a \$200 driver," says Steve Pike, senior writer for PGA.com. "There are no easy fixes. Golf can be a very tough sport—and in the end, that is why it is so appealing." And lucrative to the gadgeters.

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