

GOLF

# As Bryson DeChambeau overpowers golf courses, is he undermining the game?

By **Steve Marantz** Globe Correspondent, Updated August 16, 2020, 5:11 a.m.



Bryson DeChambeau is up to 240 pounds, and says he wants to get to 270, because mass equals distance. SEAN M. HAFHEY/GETTY

His nickname is Mad Scientist, and golf is his laboratory. His magnificent obsession is for an antidote to bogeys, missed cuts, and mediocrity.

Bryson DeChambeau's strange brew of nerdy biomechanics, lunar tee shots, bulked-up physique, fanatical work ethic, and charming/eccentric personality is still in development. After his tie for fourth in last week's PGA Championship, he seems close to

development. After his tie for fourth in last week's PGA Championship, he seems close to a breakthrough.

DeChambeau will be at TPC Boston in Norton this coming week for the Northern Trust tournament. He [won](#) at TPC Boston in 2018, and this time sits fourth in the FedExCup standings for the first of three playoff events. True to form, he also arrives with a fresh story line. It's about his distance. In a broader sense, it's about the soul of the game.

The issue crystallized in February when golf's governing bodies, the US Golf Association and the Royal & Ancient, [concluded two years of research](#) into elite players hitting for longer distances: "There is a 100-year trend of hitting distance increases in golf, as well as a corresponding increase in the length of golf courses, across the game globally. The USGA and The R&A believe this continuing cycle is detrimental to the game's long-term future . . . Increased hitting distance can undermine the core principle that the challenge of golf is about needing to demonstrate a broad range of skills to be successful."

Translation: Golf should be about more than driver/wedge.

DeChambeau happens to be the PGA Tour's new poster boy for distance. He leads in driving distance with a 323.9-yard average, the highest in PGA history, and about 25 yards farther than he averaged three years ago. He knocked one 428 yards, with a cart path assist, at the Travelers event in June.

In winning the Rocket Mortgage at the Detroit Golf Club in early July, DeChambeau averaged 350.6 yards (two drives per round are used to compute averages). His tee average in a winning effort broke Tiger Woods's record of 341.5, set in 2005 at The Open. For perspective, when DeChambeau won at TPC Boston two years ago, he averaged 311.8 yards.

Increased distance tends to produce lower scores. A 10-yard increase off the tee is worth about 0.6 to 0.7 strokes per round; a 20-yard increase is worth 1.2 to 1.4 strokes, [according to analyst and podcaster Mike Carroll](#). Thus, DeChambeau's tee game at Rocket Mortgage was worth 6.672 strokes against the field average. Runner-up Matthew

Wolff's average of 326.4 yards was worth 2.708 strokes against the field, and he lost to DeChambeau by three strokes.

The tour average off the tee was 256.5 yards in 1980, 270.2 in 1998, and 285.9 in 2003. In 2018 it was up to 296.1. DeChambeau's 323.9 demands a reckoning; no less a personage than Jack Nicklaus is convinced.

"The USGA has got to wake up sooner or later, the R&A," [Nicklaus said](#) in July. "They can't keep burying their heads to this."

## PGA Tour driving distance

Averages calculated from drives measured on two holes per round.

Year	Average	Long
2020	295.6	449
2019	293.9	457
2018	296.1	433
2017	292.5	439
2016	290.0	414
2015	289.7	428
2014	288.8	424
2013	287.2	450
2012	289.1	450
2011	290.1	463

SOURCE: PGA Tour

## Object of fascination

First, how DeChambeau got here: He is 26, single, a devout Christian and Fortnite gamer, and lives in Dallas. He grew up in California's San Joaquin Valley, the son of a club pro, tinkered with algebra at age 6, and read Homer Kelley's famous instructional book, "The Golfing Machine," which applies physics to the golf swing, at age 15.

He excelled in four sports at Clovis East High, but chose golf, and bagged a full ride to SMU, where he majored in physics and won both the NCAA individual championship and US Amateur in 2015.

A pro since 2016, he wears a Ben Hogan-style flat hat, [applies complex science](#) to his single-plane swing and same-length irons; [trains his brain](#) with electrodes attached to his head; and is [testy with course officials](#) and [TV camera operators](#) who annoy him.

He won his first PGA tournament in 2017, in his 40th start. He won four more in 2018 and earned a spot on the US Ryder Cup team.

Along the way, he became an object of fascination to his social media followers on Instagram (409k), Twitter, and Twitch. For golf media, he became a quotable gift horse.

Broadcaster David Feherty: “If you could have dinner with one dead person, who would it be?”

DeChambeau: “Einstein.”

DeChambeau recently declared that he intends to live “to 130 or 140” because technology will enable it. A tour rival, Justin Thomas, said of him, “I’m not even sure he himself knows what he’s saying sometimes.”

DeChambeau’s pronouncements don’t surprise his longtime mentor and coach, Mike Schy.

“He’s a little different because he’s a super smart guy,” Schy said. “Sometimes he comes off that he knows more than others, but it’s not on purpose. He wears his feelings, and socially it can seem awkward. I tell him, ‘A million people love you dude, and a hundred thousand don’t.’ ”

## **Strength and stability**

In 2019, as DeChambeau went winless on the PGA Tour (though he won a European Tour event in Dubai), he sought to increase his distance.

“It was low-hanging fruit,” said Schy. “He always had the ability to hit far, but he didn’t

have the body mass to be stable enough to hit it further more often.”

He stepped up his conditioning with Denver-based trainer Greg Roskopf, whose “Muscle Activation Techniques” have helped Peyton Manning, John Elway, and John Stockton. Roskopf’s theory, based on “communication” between muscle and nervous systems, was taught to DeChambeau in college, and reinforced in 2017 when he went to Roskopf with hip and back pain.

Roskopf helped strengthen his core, then other areas, muscle by muscle. Eventually, he worked him through a shoulder injury, and forearm and wrist pain.

“Every weak link was brought up to par,” said Roskopf.

DeChambeau’s quest for distance included thousands of calories and seven protein shakes per day. By late 2019, he had added 25 pounds to get to 215.

In the physics of a golf swing, extra weight generates “ground reaction force” and translates into more swing speed. Then, during the 91-day COVID-19 shutdown in the spring, DeChambeau somehow added another 25 pounds. At 240 pounds, his body mass was able to stabilize a higher swing velocity.

“It’s important to be stable; you want to make sure you’re in balance when you swing,” Schy said. “If I swing at high velocity and I’m not stable, I won’t have balance, and I won’t hit it correctly.”



For better or worse, DeChambeau attracts a lot of attention on and off the course. HARRY HOW/GETTY

DeChambeau's extra 50 pounds enabled him to increase his clubhead speed from 118 to 130 m.p.h., and ball speed from 170 to 190 m.p.h. By comparison, the average clubhead speed of the top 150 Tour players is 115 m.p.h., and the average ball speed is slightly less than 170 m.p.h.

Just as important, DeChambeau's drive accuracy of 59.75 percent is better than his 55.83 when he averaged 295 yards off the tee in 2016.

"The harder Bryson hits it, the straighter it goes," Schy said. "Jumbo-max club grips give him more control of the face at high velocity."

In April, DeChambeau [highlighted his "speed" swing](#) on the gaming site Twitch, where he hit shots viewers asked of him in exchange for charitable donations he'd match.

Viewers got a look at his speed training session, and saw him crank up ball speed to 200

viewers got a look at his speed training session, and saw him crank up ball speed to 203 m.p.h., and clubhead speed to 140 m.p.h. They also saw him do John Daly and Happy Gilmore impersonations.

## 2020 driving distance leaders

Through PGA Championship. Distance in yards.

Bryson DeChambeau	323.9
Cameron Champ	321.3
Ryan Brehm	314.7
Grayson Murray	314.1
Rory McIlroy	312.9

SOURCE: PGA Tour PGA Tour

## Long-term concerns

But even as DeChambeau glamorizes distance, the USGA/R&A Distance Report cites several problems: Courses that can't lengthen become less challenging or obsolete. Courses that lengthen use more water and chemicals. Longer courses punish recreational players and take more time to play.

"This is about the long-term future of the game," said Mike Davis, chief executive officer of the USGA. "We believe this problem will continue unless this cycle is brought to an end. With collaboration from the entire golf community, we have an opportunity to help ensure golf remains sustainable and enjoyable for generations to come."

Distance gains are attributable to modern clubs and balls, stronger and more athletic golfers, innovative swing techniques, and tightly mowed fairways that allow for extra roll. But the report makes clear the governing bodies intend to target equipment.

One option is having separate equipment rules for pros and amateurs, with the pros using dialed-back clubs and balls to restrict distance — an approach known as

“bifurcation.” The top 0.1 percent of players, the pros, would be reined in, without

impacting the other 99.9 percent. One effect would be to protect classic courses — Pebble Beach, to name one — from being rendered obsolete by distance hitters.

The counter-argument is that it complicates equipment manufacturing, and sets up a messy debate about new standards for pro clubs and balls. Also, it denies average golfers the vicarious satisfaction of playing under the same conditions as the pros.

Another approach is to adjust course architecture, build up rough, and punish long but errant drives, as Harding Park did in the PGA Championship. The PGA champion, Collin Morikawa, a 23-year-old wunderkind, averages less than 300 yards off the tee, optimizing precision.

Newly added stats this season seem to undercut the Distance Report: Of the top 10 drivers, only DeChambeau and Rory McIlroy are higher than 36th in the world rankings. Of the top 15 drivers, only DeChambeau, McIlroy, and Adam Scott are in the top 10 of the world rankings.

The PGA Tour says it will collaborate with the USGA and R&A on the distance issue. But it also issued a statement to the Globe indicating its wariness: “The PGA Tour is committed to ensuring any future solutions identified benefit the game as whole without negatively impacting the Tour, its players, or our fans’ enjoyment of the sport.”

## **Still missing: A major**

DeChambeau has allowed his actions to speak for themselves. He has told advisers he intends to add another 30 pounds to get to 270. More mass equals more distance. The larger he gets, though, and the farther he hits it, the more inevitable are insinuations about steroids and other PEDs, which his swing coach and trainer flatly dismiss.

“If that were the case, he wouldn’t carry as much fat,” said Schy. “You have to know him;



there will never be a drug that goes into his body.”

Said Roskopf, “PEDs are not even a consideration for him. But I can understand why someone outside looking in questions that. I’ve worked with the Broncos for 23 years and I’ve never seen anybody gain as much strength in a six-month period as Bryson.”

The latter speaks to DeChambeau’s work ethic. His former college coach, Jason Enloe, once compared him to Tiger Woods, Nicklaus, Kobe Bryant, and Michael Jordan. Nobody has compared him to Barry Bonds or Mark McGwire — yet.



DeChambeau posted his best finish so far in a major in the recent PGA Championship. EZRA SHAW/GETTY

His trajectory is upward but far from certain. His ferocious swing and added bulk pose a long-term risk to his body, as Woods can attest. His diet and sugar consumption — seven protein shakes a day! — concern his advisers, because his father has diabetes and required a kidney transplant.

DeChambeau’s game is an experiment. Longer drives put more focus on his wedge play

DeChambeau's game is an experiment. Longer drives put more focus on his wedge play, which is adequate at best; his minus-0.015 in shots gained around the green ranks 120th,

down from 78th in 2018. More encouraging is his putting, where his shots gained of 0.838 ranks sixth, up from 145th in 2017.

Bottom line, until DeChambeau wins a major, he'll be an unfulfilled experiment, the brainy guy who hits for distance, fascinating but incomplete. Before he tied for fourth at the PGA, he had missed the cut in 6 of 14 majors and had placed no higher than 15th.

In the cinematic tradition of mad scientists, DeChambeau carries on where Young Frankenstein and Dr. Evil left off. At Harding Park, his driver shaft snapped when he leaned on it while picking up his tee. A TV camera caught his reaction.

"That was weird," he said with a sly grin. "Swinging too hard."

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