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Callaway HX Tour 56

PRICE: £40 (per dozen)

USED BY: Anton Haig, Thongchai Jaidee

What the manufacturer says:

Engineered for mid range to aggressive swing speeds and golfers who want a softer ball with even more bite on the green. The cover is marginally thicker in the 56 compared to its stablemate.

What we say:

A thicker cover and a slightly harder feeling, especially with the driver. It may not have the feel of the HX Tour, but the spin control with shorter clubs is very good. It doesn't feel quite as soft, though, off the putter face.

Flightscope evidence:

Again a lively ball speed but, for Nick's swing, the spin characteristics were better. Good spin with the 9-iron and quite a low spin off the driver, which is a good combination.

Faldo:

A little harder. A bit like the Nike Platinum. There is a pattern emerging here which is all about your swing speed. For me the HX Tour, Nike Black and Pro V1 are all softer feeling and probably best suited to my driver swing speed.

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TaylorMade TP Red

PRICE: £40 (per dozen)

USED BY: Sergio Garcia, Darren Clarke, Paul McGinley, Bradley Dredge

What the manufacturer says:

The TP Red's core delivers high COR off every club for fast ball speed. A thin ionomer mantle works with the core to promote a lower 'Tour' launch angle. Advanced dimple design delivers optimum ratio of lift and drag to extend the back-half of ball flight for longer hang-time.

What we say:

The softer feeling of the two TaylorMade balls, it also promotes a slightly lower ball flight.

Flightscope evidence:

Definitely in the bottom half for trajectory, especially with the 5-iron and driver. Again, though, the spin rates were quite low with all three clubs.

Faldo:

It feels a little softer than the TP Black. Another nice ball and TaylorMade has done well to get it into play so quickly with its Tour players. You wouldn't get Sergio using this if he didn't want to. It just underlines to me how there are so many more quality, premium products in the ball market these days.

Distance challenge

How Nick fared when he took on the might of his 18-year-old son

"Dad, when you've finished, can we have a long driving contest?" Matthew Faldo was feeling confident. He'd watched his 50-year-old father pummel ball after ball up the range and may just have suspected that the old man was starting to get a little tired.

So the gauntlet was laid down and both men set about drilling four balls each as far as they could into the wind. The breeze was a key factor in the outcome.

It was all about launch angles and trajectory as Matthew averaged 236 yards with a clubhead speed of 110mph while Nick returned a 261 average with a slower club speed of 109mph. The exercise emphasised how important it is to get the right flight and spin on your shots. Flightscope measured Nick's highest ball flight at 117ft, while the harder swinging youngster managed to send one ball into orbit at 144ft above the ground. A downward strike was imparting unwanted backspin.



2 Titleist Pro V1x

No ball achieved a higher spin rate with the 9-iron than this one. A whopping 8,930rpm, dropping to 2,662 off the driver. A good combo.

3 Callaway HX Tour

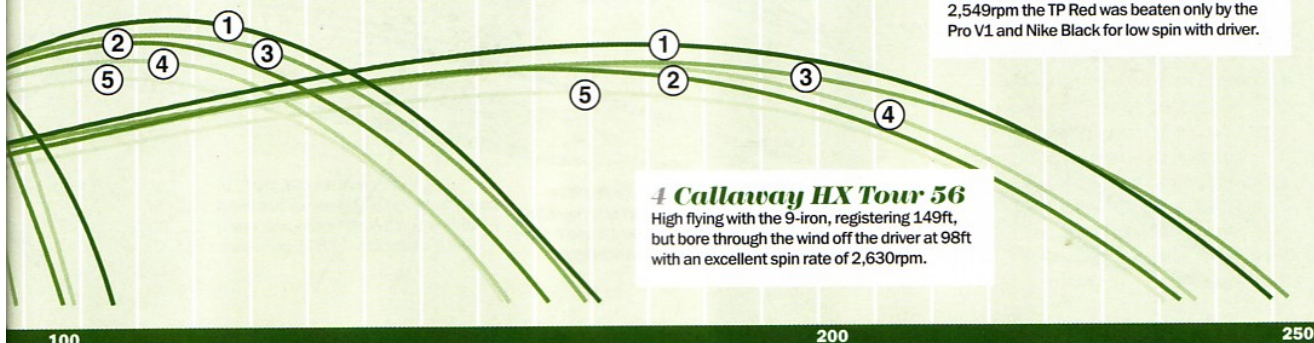
This was never intended to be hugely scientific, but this ball won the longest carry gold medal, at 255 yards, with a swing speed of 109.9mph.

5 TaylorMade TP Red

A low, penetrative flight with the 9 iron. At 2,549rpm the TP Red was beaten only by the Pro V1 and Nike Black for low spin with driver.

4 Callaway HX Tour 56

High flying with the 9-iron, registering 149ft, but bore through the wind off the driver at 98ft with an excellent spin rate of 2,630rpm.



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200

250

My ten of the best

Six-time Major champion Nick Faldo takes a closer look at the various balls played by the world's leading Tour players.

WORDS BY NICK FALDO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANGUS MURRAY



What amazes me about the golf balls we use today is how it offers such a combination of distance and control. I am also amazed by the amount of choice in today's market. It doesn't seem so long ago that the vast majority of

pros on the Tour circuit were choosing between a Titleist or a Maxfli, but now a whole host of manufacturers, from TaylorMade and Nike to Srixon and Callaway, now have balls in play.

On top of that, each ball has slightly different performance characteristics to suit players with different swing speeds and angles of attack. Some players need a ball that spins more, while others require one that spins less. It can be quite a complicated business.

The harder hitters often use a harder ball because they are able to get greater performance

benefits out of it, but that doesn't mean all heavy hitters use firmer models. José Maria Olazábal, for instance, is not overly long off the tee, but he uses Titleist's Pro V1x to subdue the spin he gets with his irons.

Ball technology has come on in leaps and bounds, but even so, you generally have two options to choose from. Do you want distance off the tee, but with less spin control around the greens, or vice versa?

But be careful – if you can't summon the power to compress a hard ball properly then it probably won't benefit you at all. The ball is not as easy to compress now. I date back to the liquid centre, wound ball. You squashed it, trapping it against the turf. If you really hit hard, it didn't make a substantial difference. It certainly wasn't worth changing your swing for that extra power. But all that has changed because the harder you hit the modern ball, the more performance you will get out of it.

So let's take a look at the choices and see what happened when I put 10 of the leading premium balls through their paces. These are all balls that are used by players on the pro Tours. It was the case, not so long ago, that the pros tended to use what might be termed 'prototypes', or they had balls that were specially made for them. But production values are so good these days that, according to manufacturers, the balls in the bags on Tour should be exactly the same as those in the shops.

The test

To get a feel for the performance characteristics of each ball, Nick hit each one with a 9-iron, 5-iron and a driver. We used a FlightScope launch monitor to record the height, distance and spin rates of each shot. This data, plus Nick's own comments, gave us a picture of how they fared.





Equipment

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Titleist Pro V1

PRICE: £44 (per dozen)

USED BY: David Toms, Steve Stricker, Scott Verplank, Nick O'Hern

What the manufacturer says:

The new Pro V1 is designed for serious golfers of all levels that demand Tour-validated technology. A three-piece ball with enhanced aerodynamics with a slightly higher flight for longer distance, soft feel and stop and drop control. It is the most durable Titleist played by the pros.

What we say:

Nick's swing speed varied from 80mph with a 9-iron to around 108 with a driver. At those speeds, he is on the cusp between the two Titleist models. The Pro V1 is not a 'big hitters' ball in Tour terms and is suited to most amateurs.

Flightscope evidence:

With Nick's swing, the Pro V1 achieved the greatest average carry of all the balls on trial when struck with a 9-iron, 5-iron and driver.

Faldo:

Very similar on feel and sound to the Pro V1x, which is not that surprising. The trajectory was exactly what you are looking for, and what really surprised me was the added distance I achieved compared to its sister product.

Titleist Pro V1x

PRICE: £44 (per dozen)

USED BY: Pádraig Harrington, Ángel Cabrera, Vijay Singh, Zach Johnson, José María Olazábal

What the manufacturer says:

A four-piece ball designed for a lower flight. The ball should feel harder and be longer off the tee than the Pro V1. The ball features a soft centre, dual core design for low spin off the driver, but the elastomer cover increases spin in the irons.

What we say:

It is much harder to spot the seam on the new Pro V1 balls because they have shaped the two halves in a wavy line. The new ball also features a line to help with alignment when putting.

Flightscope evidence:

The two Pro V1s had the most pronounced spin-rate changes from 9-iron to driver, the lofted club spinning at over 8,000rpm, while the driver dropping into the 2,000 bracket. A good distance/control combination.

Faldo:

I'm quite familiar with this ball. I like the sound and the feel and it gives the trajectory that I'm looking for. It's all down to personal taste, but this ball is consistent and I'm very comfortable with the way that it performs.

Callaway HX Tour

PRICE: £40 (per dozen)

USED BY: Ernie Els, Michael Campbell, Phil Mickelson, Nick Dougherty, Thomas Björn

What the manufacturer says:

Engineered for aggressive swing speeds and golfers who want less spin with the driver and plenty of bite on the green. A new chemical composition core that is faster and softer.

What we say:

Surprisingly favoured by Ernie and Phil when you consider that they have the power to compress the HX Tour 56. This again underlines the preferences of each individual player. In the case of Els and Mickelson, length off the tee is not as crucial as playing a ball with a softer feel that gives more touch around the greens.

Flightscope evidence:

Comparisons between clubhead speed and ball speed showed that this ball does appear hot, especially off the mid-irons.

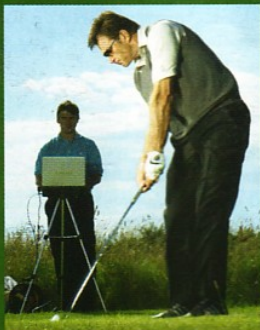
Faldo:

Again, there is a fair amount of spring here, you can really feel it at impact. I hit this ball with a 9-iron, 5-iron and a driver and each time the speed off the clubface was noticeable. Quite a lively little number.

Radar tracking

Every ball was plotted and analysed in minute detail

Pádraig Harrington's distance control on the way to winning at Carnoustie may be partly explained by his purchase of a new practice aid. The Irishman owns a FlightScope radar ball monitor that is able to track the precise path of a ball from the moment it is struck until it hits the ground. For the purposes of this trial, we used the FlightScope Kudu, an indoor/outdoor system that delivers an extensive range of results from carry distance and launch angle to spin rates and ball speed. For details, visit the website www.flightscope.com or ring 01484 6612900.



1 Titleist Pro V1

Mid-range trajectory in this trial of the elite is very acceptable, and the spin rates from 9-iron to driver were excellent (8,377 to 2,372rpm).

Height vs Distance (yds)

