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That's infotainment

Forget Ginsu knives; the hottest thing in infomercials today is golf products

BY GORDON WELLS

It all started in 1984 when President Reagan deregulated the amount of time television stations could allow for commercials. Since then the American viewer has been treated (or subjected, pick your verb) to the likes of Ron Popeil (Ronco, the Popeil Pocket Fisherman), Ross Perot, Ginsu knives and Ab-Toners/Isolators/Blasters. And yes, thanks to infomercials, we can buy golf stuff, too.

Surely you remember Wally Armstrong, whose "Maximizing Your Game" teaching package introduced golfers to the benefits of coat hangers, umbrellas and buckets. "It was a blast," he recalls of making the infomercial that helped sell more than half a million video tapes. "The exposure I've received is far better than the financial rewards."

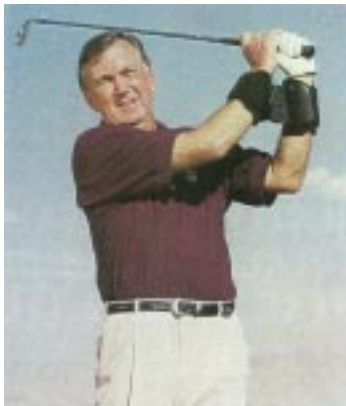
Today, infomercials are gaining in popularity faster than a Sunday afternoon downhill putt at Augusta National. They're trying to sell us drivers that will hit the ball farther and straighter than we've ever hit it before, wedges that will back a ball up on a downslope, swing trainers that will lock our body into the proper position until we scream "uncle!" and measuring devices that will give us about as much instant feedback as NASA gets from its computers.

Apparently their sales pitches are working—Taylor Made reports that 99 percent of the people who call in as a result of their infomercial end up buying.

For several reasons, infomercials and golf are a perfect mix. First, golfers will do virtually anything to discover the "secret" of playing well. And each infomercial has its own "secret," all wrapped up in a 30-minute package. But it's not like the manufacturers are preying on an uneducated audience; the folks who make the Alien Wedge report that 36 percent of their infomercial customers have postgraduate



McCord (top) tells Taylor Made's story. Geilberger pitches Pro Wedge Angel.



degrees.

Second, "Infomercials are very effective at demonstrating what the product does," says Tony Kerry of Script to Screen, a popular infomercial production house in Los Angeles. There are so many gadgets and techniques on tape out there, it makes your head spin. The objective for the advertisers is to convince you, by golly, that their product is the best. And, sadly, some could use a lot more than 30 minutes.

Third, infomercials are relatively inexpensive to produce—around \$200,000-\$400,000, not including what the celebrity "talent" is paid, according to one source. As for the cost of the air time, it can be as cheap as \$2,000 for a one-market, one-station buy or up to tens of thousands for network time. And the time slot chosen—80 percent of all infomercials run in a time block from

careful. I've only done one [infomercial], but only because I truly believe in the product."

Even before Taylor Made became the first mega company to get into golf infomercials, the future was clear: Infomercials are here to stay and more and bigger companies will be joining the fray.

"We have no concrete plans, but infomercials are something we can't ignore," says Pete Samuels, advertising manager for Karsten Manufacturing, makers of Ping clubs. "We've discussed them, but we have to do it right. [Infomercials] are a great way to tell our story."

Ditto from Gerry Stefanko, whose agency handles the marketing for Zevo. "They're a valuable tool and [Zevo] would greatly benefit in being able to tell their custom-fitting process." And this from Julie Davis,



Pate (right) gives spin as viewers become familiar with the Alien Wedge

Friday night to Monday morning—keeps the cost down, too.

There's good news, too, for anyone skeptical of the products or the companies in infomercials. Someone is watching out for you. "Keep in mind, the infomercial industry is policed by the National Infomercial Marketing Association," says Doug Kelly, media director at Black Rock Golf (makers of the Killer Bee driver). "They're kind of like Good Housekeeping, so their approval is important. A good infomercial should carry at least a 30-day, money-back guarantee to ease the consumer's mind about the purchase."

There's also the reputation of the "talent" involved. Don't think Jerry Pate doesn't care whether you think the Alien is really a good wedge.

"To say that I'm concerned about integrity and credibility is an understatement," says Pate. "It's true in life, even down to who cuts my lawn or who takes my kids camping. You've got to be careful."

Echoing those sentiments is two time U.S. Open champion Andy North, who with Lee Trevino endorses the Tempo Trainer 911. "Our credibility is on the line," North says. "We are inundated with opportunities, but is it [the product] good or isn't it? We have to be very

advertising manager for Callaway: "Our eyes are open."

"The stigma is gone," says Kim Doren, director of advertising for Cobra Golf, referring to the once questionable reputation surrounding infomercials, "Manufacturers are even using them to sell cars now. We have no bias against them, but the timing hasn't been right."

Yes ma'am, that'll be Visa...it expired last month, but my bank said I could still use it...

Rating the infomercials

Unless you're an insomniac, it's impossible to view every golf infomercial on the tube these days. So we don't claim that this list is all-inclusive. But here's what we thought of the ones we have seen recently. Five stars is the highest rating. And the rating refers to the quality of the infomercial itself, not the product.

******The Viper Bite Wedge.** (800) 321-4568. Three easy payments of \$34.95 shipping and handling. They tell you the 60-degree Viper Bite features "Carbide Technology." It looks like it's got sandpaper on the face. But when they put it in the hands of pros (including Gene Litter) and hacks alike, it does everything but back up a marble on your kid's aluminum slide. My question is, why can't they combine a well-produced sales pitch with some basic instruction?

******The Alien Wedge.** (800) 544-1888. Three easy payments of \$33.95 plus \$14.95 S&H. Dubbed "The Ultimate Wedge Challenge," this is a very well done infomercial. Hosted by Jim Simpson, inventor Pat Simmons and Jerry Pate, the show features several celebrities using the wedge in various situations. The ending is predictable as we watch Pate reenact his famous lake dive from the '82 Players Championship. I couldn't help hoping that Lee Meriwether would be called on to hit the crucial shot.

******Taylor Made Golf.** (800) 376-2900. No price given; you call for a catalog and your

nearest retailer. A very impressive "Storymercial" featuring Gary McCord as the host with appearances by a bunch of Taylor Made tour pros. As slick as it is, one of the contestants tried to hit a 3-iron 245 yards. Excuse me?

******The Killer Bee by Black Rock.** (800) 737-2676. Three easy payments of \$66.65 (or \$199.95) plus \$14.95 S&H. John Brodie and the hilarious Rocky Thompson are featured in two infomercials for The Killer Bee, an oversized driver with a 46-inch shaft. Entertaining, mainly because Thompson could sell underwear to nudists.

******The Tempo Trainer 911.** (800) 851-4477. Three easy payments of \$44.00 plus \$9.95 S&H. Features Lee Trevino and Andy North and shows a device about the size of a video cassette that you put on the ground a little outside and behind your ball before you swing. It measures your tempo and clubhead speed.

*****The Pro Wedge Angel.** (800) 317-6602. Three easy payments of just \$29.95 plus \$14.95 S&H. Another swing training device, consisting of two Velcro bands you attach to your forearms, then a cupped device you place between them that holds your arms in place during the swing. It's a slick effort by credible host including Al Geiberger and Donna Caponi.

*****The Drivemaster.** (800) 850-6060. Four easy payments of just \$19.99 plus \$6.95 S&H. An interesting swing trainer that

teaches the user the proper release. It's kind of a golf club with a normal grip, a fiberglass shaft that extends as you release, and a golf ball at the end instead of a clubhead. It extends and clicks when you release. I thought about ordering one of these—to practice flycasting in my family room.

****The SAM2000.** (800) 421-1310. No price given. It's one of those marvels of PVC that you stand in and practice swinging. It looks like a giant Hula Hoop with legs. It's adjustable and comes with elastic cords you attach to your wrist for strengthening the golf muscles. They promise to cut your handicap in half in just 21 days.

****David Lee's Gravity Golf.** (800) 258-0232. Three easy payments of \$49.95 plus \$9.95 S&H. Another teaching system. It's very well produced and features cameos by several Senior PGA Tour and LPGA pros. It's hard, though, to figure out what they're selling. It includes a book and audio tapes so you can practice in the car. In the *car*?

***Bob Mann's Automatic Golf.** (800) 258-0189. \$39.95 plus \$6.95 S&H. This is a series of video tapes outlining Bob Mann's revolutionary method of teaching the golf swing. We watch Bob single-handedly rejuvenate the swings of Bruce Devlin, Hubert Green and Art Sellinger. Only problem is we have no idea what his technique is all about. There's something in there about the "motormove," but that's it.

—Gordon Wells