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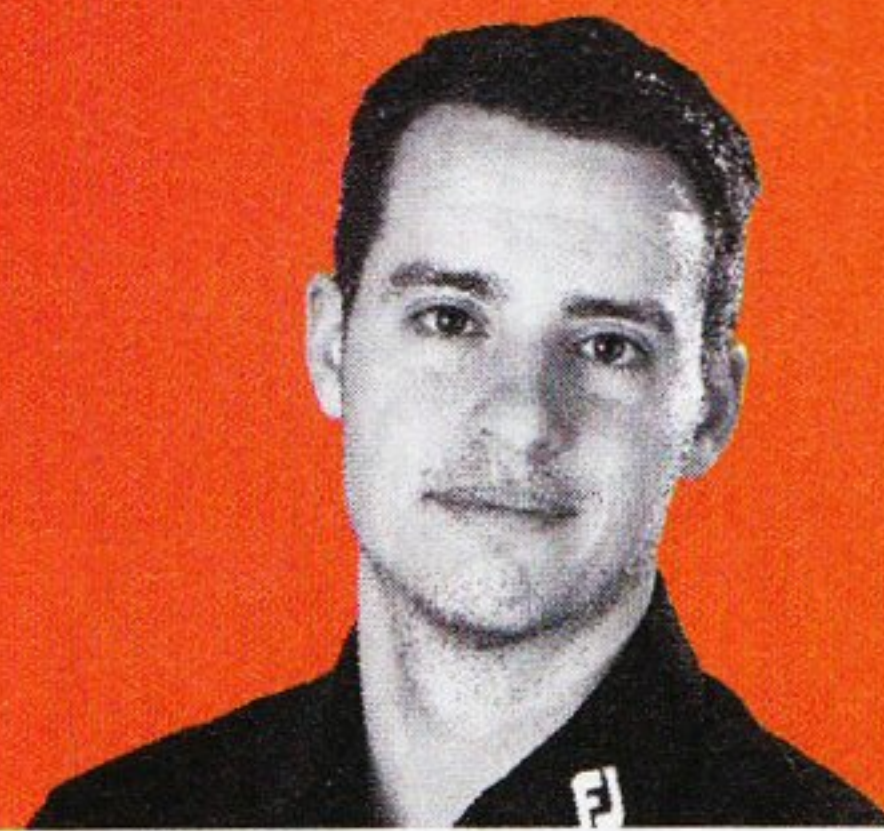
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GPS OR LASER RANGEFINDER?

A recent round with a new handheld GPS device has opened my eyes to the limitations of my trusty laser rangefinder. Here, I debate the pros and cons of each...

I'm a laser rangefinder user. Always have been, always will be. Well, that's what I thought until I recently played a round with the new SkyCaddie SX500 handheld GPS. My perception about the vagueness of GPS devices meant I always dismissed them when it came to my weekend rounds, lambasting the generic front, middle and back distances and inwardly cursing the time it takes for the yardages to update.

How wrong I was. Laser rangefinders certainly have their advantages, mostly in getting precise distances to the flag – ideal if you're playing well and know your numbers – but they have their limitations too. Many of the new advances in laser technology are wonderful – they can take into account slope and even temperature and altitude – but they push the price up significantly, which is hard to justify given that you're not permitted to use many of these features in competitive rounds.

I was testing the SX500 against the new Bushnell Pro XE, which, don't get me wrong, is one of the best lasers around (who doesn't want a laser that sticks to your car door?). But a lot of the new features lie dormant in the monthly medal, so it makes me question the value they offer the serious amateur golfer.

By contrast, the level of detail the SX500 provides, along with the clarity and HD detail of the hole maps on the screen, was genuinely mind-blowing. Looking at the hole as the crow flies, I could see, even touch, where I wanted my ball to finish off the tee to avoid the trouble and give myself a preferred distance for my approach shot. It told me distances to reach and carry hazards, while the shape of the green even adjusted on screen based on the direction from which I would be playing.

know the distance to the middle of the green? Many courses have colour-coded pins for front, middle and back and it's ironic to me that a GPS device's basic information may actually help my scores by discouraging me from chasing the tight pins that get me in trouble.

Not everyone will share this outlook and will still prefer to know the exact distance, especially lower handicappers seeking birdies, but there's certainly some merit to aiming at the middle of the green on every approach shot.

"A GPS device's basic info may well discourage me from chasing tight pins that get me in trouble"

I do think that lasers have their place. Some have GPS functionality and, with practice, they're incredibly quick to use. The SX500 GPS can offer exact distances to the pin too, but realistically that's only if you're in the fortunate position of obtaining a pin sheet, which from my experience is a rarity at most golf clubs besides on Club Championship weekend.

Thinking about it a little deeper, is it really a bad thing if I don't know the exact distance to the flag as long as I

I was one of those golfers but my GPS experience got me reflecting on where I most often drop shots and it is certainly with my irons, although this is partly down to the many technical and mental deficiencies that often keep me awake at night! The fact that lasers rely on line of sight means they're not much use on courses with lots of blind tee shots, and seeing an overview of a hole does provide a clearer image in your mind of what lies ahead, something that's especially useful on unfamiliar tracks.

So, choosing the best type of distance device for you really does depend on the courses you play and whether your rounds are mostly competitive or friendly. It makes sense for a low-handicapper playing mostly competitive rounds at their home club to veer towards a laser, while for golfers who play a lot of new courses, the extra information on a GPS like the SX500 will be invaluable.

As for me, I'm still undecided. Would it be weird to use one of each?

■ Joel Tadman is GM technical editor

WHAT I'VE BEEN TESTING THIS MONTH



POWAKADDY COMPACT G2i GPS ELECTRIC TROLLEY

Easy-to-read distances on a sturdy trolley that folds down in a simple manoeuvre.



G/FORE SADDLE GALLIVANTER SHOES

Perfect for the purist, these leather shoes are surprisingly soft. The sole does clog with dirt a little too easily though.



TAYLORMADE FLEXTech STAND BAG

Doesn't keep heavy rain completely at bay but is light and has lots of pockets that provide ample storage.