



## THE GOLF GAME

## Top-Flite Gets Macho. Callaway pairs underused patents with over-the-top advertising to revive a ball and a brand

BY ALICE PARK

"MAN THE FREAK UP ... PERMISSION TO TALK smack when others lay up ... Put hair on your game's chest." Not exactly the type of encouragement you'd expect to hear from caddies on exclusive golf courses. And that's exactly the point of Top-Flite's edgy new commercials. Anchored by wry ESPN personality Kenny Mayne, the segments are designed to get the competitive juices going and the fairways buzzing again about the struggling company's balls—golf balls, to be a tad more specific.

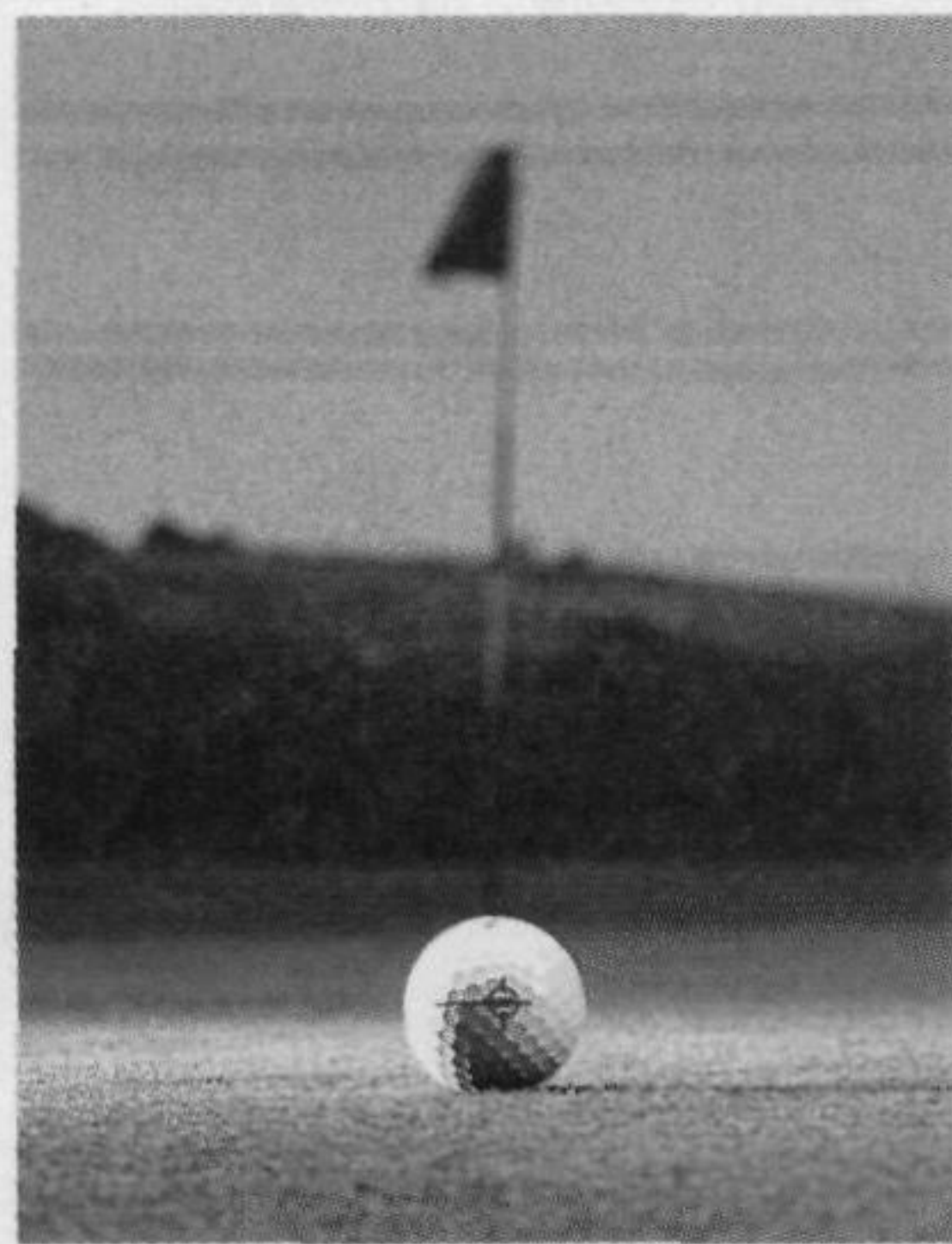
You wouldn't think a golf ball would have to worry about its rep, but it turns out that little dimpled orbs can be a snooty bunch. At the top is Titleist, makers of the ProV1 series favored by PGA Tour pros and their wannabes. More than half the balls sold in the U.S. are stamped

TITLEIST OF PINNACLE, its value line, aimed at the duffer not willing to part with the nearly \$60 per dozen for the top shelf. Nike, Callaway Golf and TaylorMade scramble for much of the rest.

And at the bottom is Top-Flite, for years proud makers of the rock-hardest projectile off the tee (it's the distance, stupid!) and purveyors of double-dozen packs for less than \$20. Its last innovation occurred in the hickory age. Top-Flite's balls had come to deserve their "Rock-Flite" and "ammunition"

monikers. But since Callaway bought the company from Spalding in 2003, Top-Flite has been on a technology tear, launching two new balls in two years and attempting to reposition itself as a rebel.

Which explains the in-your-face marketing, designed to appeal to the tiger



**Grip it and rip it** The D2 features a dimple-in-dimple design

**Aiming high** Callaway's Colton spotted some technological opportunities in the Top-Flite portfolio

on every tee. After the release of its D2 ball last year, Top-Flite's market share inched up from 5.4% to 6.8% in May, the longest sustained growth it had seen in a while. That's still a dimple on the \$763 million U.S. golf-ball market. "We weren't expecting a big bounce, but it beat our expectations, and it's the first step toward breaking the stigma that Top-Flite has had for the last 10 years," says Jeff Colton, senior vice president of R&D at Callaway, who oversaw Top-Flite's relaunch.

When Colton got hold of the Top-Flite portfolio, he was surprised to find a trove of technology patents that hadn't been fully exploited. Callaway discovered opportunity in one of them, dimple-in-dimple technology, which became the platform for the D2. As the name implies, it features a smaller dimple embedded inside a larger one. The result is a ball with an impressive aerodynamic flight and distance (never a problem with the Rock-Flites) that retains enough softness for spinning and respectable control around the greens. "It plays like a poor man's tour ball," says Colton.

After two years and nearly 100 prototypes, the D2 was finally perfected. But the biggest challenge was yet to come. Colton was convinced that the ball could fly, but Top-Flite had become so synonymous with clunky range balls that getting golfers to try the new D2s would be harder than getting a tee time at Pebble. So the marketing team came up with RFID, not to track inventory but as a clever intro: Rock-Flite Is Dead. Armed with balls stamped with these letters, Callaway approached players like John Freeman, head pro at Edgewood in Big Bend, Wis. "After shooting a 64, I was asking, 'What ball was it?'" says Freeman. "They e-mailed back and said it was a

### 'It's the first step toward breaking the stigma that Top-Flite has had.'

—JEFF COLTON, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF R&D, CALLAWAY GOLF

Top-Flite. It kind of threw me off, but I've played it ever since."

The D2, which comes in Feel, Distance and Straight versions, now outsells the Titleist and Callaway balls Freeman sells. Maybe that's not exactly what Callaway had in mind, but at least Top-Flite is in a better position to face Pinnacle, which plans to launch eight new balls starting this fall. As Top-Flite's ad says, "There are scarier things than losing your ball. Like your reputation." Bring it on. ■