

More Mesquite

The distance dogma

THE DRIVER-CHALLENGED FLOCK TO DESERT TO HEAR ART SELLINGER PREACH HIS LONG-DRIVE GOSPEL

By James Achenbach

Mesquite, Nev.

The yardage seekers are drawn here, as if on a religious crusade.

They come from around the world. They are golfers seeking longer drives. They listen intently as their prophet barks the elementary question: "How fast can you swing the stick?"

The stick is the golf shaft. Speed is their mantra. They swing that stick until they're blue in the face and white in the knuckles. They swing it and swing it until the noise they hear sounds like a jet plane knifing through the blue Nevada sky.

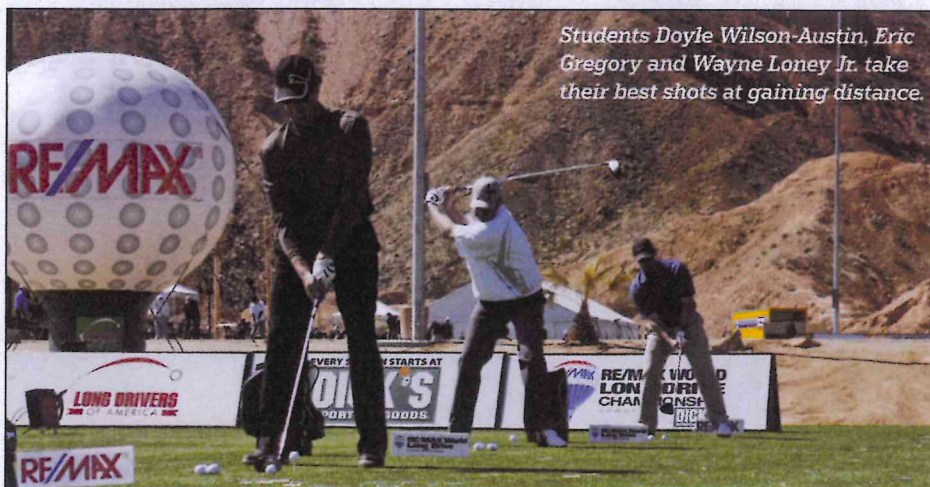
Whooooosh.

"That's it," compliments their leader, Art Sellinger, the two-time world long-drive champion. This three-day golf school, the Long Drivers of America Power Academy, is Sellinger's baby.

It was held in March in Mesquite, which has become the long-drive capital of the golf universe. The globally televised Re/Max World Long Drive Championship also is contested here, turning world champs Jason Zuback and Jamie Sadlowksi into household names among golfers who live to hit it longer.

Sure, many of the home-run fanatics who attend Sellinger's school don't give a hoot about the direction of their drives or the scores they shoot. They just want to hit the ball as far as humanly possible.

Staring the distance demons squarely in the eye, Sellinger is on record as promising his students an extra 20 yards. Toward that end, he showed up at his 2011 school armed with a collection of Trackman launch



Students Doyle Wilson-Austin, Eric Gregory and Wayne Loney Jr. take their best shots at gaining distance.

monitors and a staff full of former world long-drive champions.

Every student is measured before and after, as if to say, "This is who you were, weakling, and this is who you are today. Stand tall and blast the smithereens out of that golf ball."

When Sellinger, LDA owner and organizer of the World Championship, first brought the LDA Power Academy to Mesquite in 2010, he expected to attract a group of aspiring long-drive competitors.

After all, the school is held at the same facility, the Mesquite Regional Sports Park, that hosts the world championship. This is the world's most grandiose hitting arena, and Sellinger positions his students on the perfectly flat, perfectly mowed grid and allows them to hit as if they were world-championship contenders.

Instead of long-drive pros, what Sellinger really attracted was a diverse group of amateurs, many in their 60s or 70s, with average golfing ability.

No matter. Three days of distance boot camp can make any golfer feel like a warrior.

Ken Tomlinson, 72, traveled here from Columbia, S.C., to whack golf balls at the mesas of Mesquite. The designer of Tidewater Golf Club in Cherry Grove Beach, S.C., Tomlinson

remains a ferociously competitive golfer.

"I'm not done yet," he said. "I've still got some good golf left in me, but I want to hit the ball farther. It's just about that simple. I needed to find somebody to tell me how to practice, what to work on, and how to take all that from the range to the golf course."

Ray Nesbett, 71, journeyed from Anchorage, Alaska, to sip the LDA Kool-Aid.

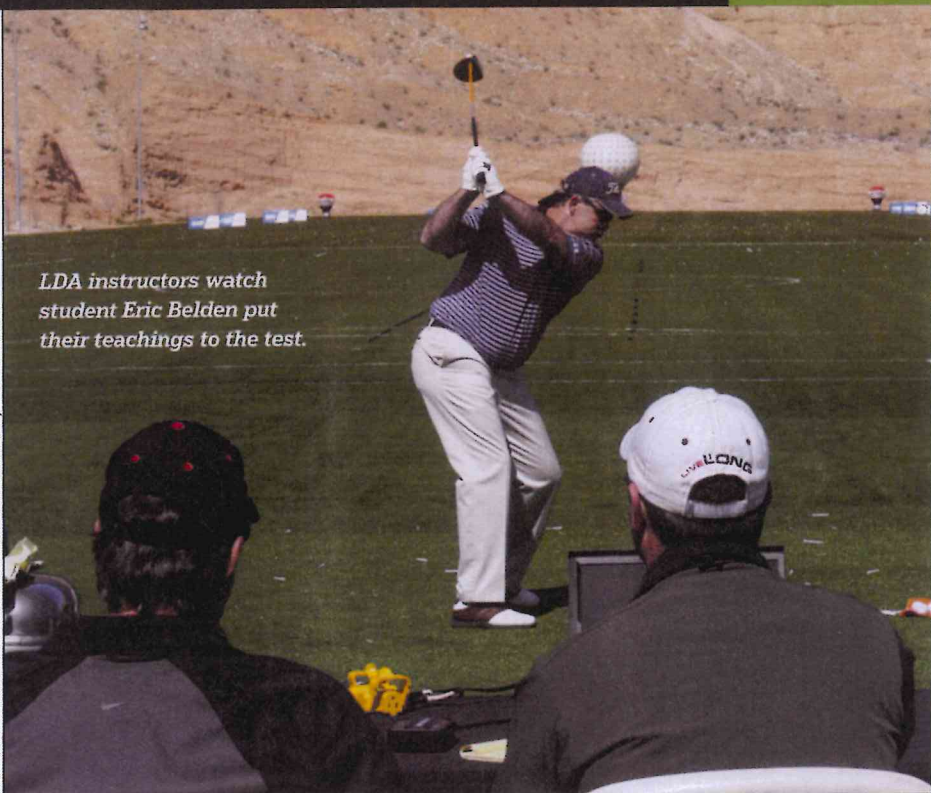
"If I could have learned this 20 years ago," Nesbett said after the school was over, "I'd be a scratch (handicap) by now. I'm at least 20 yards longer. Probably 30 yards longer. I've been to golf schools all my life, but nothing can compare with this."

One of the Power Academy secrets is its simplicity. It's all about distance. Long-drive champions continually talk about how they train, how they prepare, how they feel, what they think about when they are hitting.

Despite his ability to drive it long, Sellinger has an even greater ability to inspire and motivate his students. He is a world-class speaker and presenter.

Every school day starts with a Sellinger clinic. From there, students are divided into small groups and work with different instructors.

Multiple-time world champ Bobby



LDA instructors watch student Eric Belden put their teachings to the test.

Driving school

The next Long Drivers of America Power Academy will be held Sept. 11-14 at WinStar World Casino in Thackerville, Okla., about 80 miles north of Dallas. Information: longdrivers.com; 888-233-4654

Wilson is a favorite teacher for many students, but Tomlinson developed his closest bond with PGA professional Jason Witezak from Phoenix. Witezak, who once kicked a 57-yard field goal in the Arena Football League, is known primarily as a successful tournament golfer and long-drive competitor who is an expert with the Trackman launch monitor.

Sellinger knows how to effectively push and prod his students. He can badger them. He can be critical. There is a tone of reality about everything that happens here.

"We don't lie to anybody," Sellinger said. "We identify every golfer's potential, and we show them how to get there. Everybody can hit the ball farther."

Fitness is part of the puzzle, and Sellinger's team in Mesquite included chiropractor and physical trainer Dave Middleton of St. George, Utah.

Christopher Hallas of London

(that's right, England) came to the school with his father, Carsten Hallas, who lives in Marbella, Spain.

Hallas, 27, would like to be an accomplished tournament player, which sets him apart from most students at this school. Dan Martinez, 42, is an attorney in St. Petersburg, Fla., who wanted nothing more than to hit longer drives.

"That's all I want," Martinez said. "I had a hard time finding a school that would concentrate on the driver. But here it is."

For three days, Sellinger's 28 students and 14 LDA instructors and personnel were inseparable. They stayed at the CasaBlanca Resort and Casino. They ate breakfast, lunch and dinner together. They constantly talked golf.

The cost, which included the hotel, all meals, a goodie bag, a golf tournament and a new driver from Adams Golf, was \$100 to join the LDA for one year, plus \$1,995 tuition.

"The best value I've ever seen in golf," Nesbett said.

The next LDA Power Academy is in September in Oklahoma, although Sellinger expects to return to Mesquite in March.

Ye of insufficient yardage, bring your desire to become a bomber. ○



#1 Bag In Golf*

*Golf DataTech percent unit share, on/off course combined.

