

IF THE SHOE FITS

When Fred Couples rocked up at Augusta for this year's Masters wearing shoes that looked like skateboard sneakers, it caught the attention of young and old alike.

The young because they looked cool, and older golfers because they looked comfortable – which is exactly why Couples was wearing them.

That he went round Augusta in these shoes – Ecco's Golf Street Premier - firing his best ever Masters score to lead after the first round, and was still in contention on the last day, really got people talking about them.

Asked by commentators what had made the difference to his form this year, Couples replied "wearing comfortable shoes".

Some time before this, somewhere on the Melbourne sandbelt, "Bill", plagued by rheumatoid arthritis and unable to get into his normal golf shoes, put on some comfortable sports shoes and headed off to play. To his dismay, he was "rather officiously" told by the lady captain that his shoes were not acceptable.

Elsewhere, "Jane" approached her golf club, after undergoing major foot surgery, with a medical certificate requesting a temporary exemption to wear sports shoes while her foot recovered. While not expressly refusing her, it was made very plain that she was expected to find a quick solution. The message was there: wear the required shoes or play elsewhere. Shocked, she went home to find a letter from the club inviting her to play pennant for them.

Bill and Jane are just two examples of club golfers who are flouting footwear regulations in order to keep playing the game they love. The question is, why do they need to?

Regulations differ between professional and amateur golf. There are no specific restrictions on professionals beyond wearing non-metal spikes at courses which request it. Caddies, however, must not wear metal spikes at all and are usually seen in sports shoes.

Simon Buttley from the PGA Tour of Australasia said footwear regulations are a non-issue on Tour. Should one of the players in the President's Cup next year at Royal Melbourne want to play in sports shoes, for example, there wouldn't be a problem.

That there is an issue in club golf seems particularly ironic given that pro golfers are generally young and able-bodied whereas club golfers have an average age around 60 and bodies showing more than a touch of wear and tear.

Neither Women's Golf Victoria nor the Victorian Golf Association set down guidelines on acceptable footwear other than respecting the code of host clubs. Nor does any issue come from the R&A or USGA.

Curiously, footwear, unlike anything else used to play golf, falls into both the Rules of Golf *and* dress regulations.

The R&A's concern lies solely (pun intended) with conforming equipment. According to Claire Bates, Assistant Director - Equipment Standards of the R&A, golf shoes are covered by Rule 14.3, forbidding a player using unusual equipment or devices, or using equipment in an unusual way, to gain an unfair advantage over fellow competitors.

There is no definition of a conforming shoe per se and Bates is "of the view that there would be nothing in the Equipment Rules to prevent a player from wearing a shoe which is not specifically designed for golf."

That brings us, then, to the dress regulations set by clubs, which are designed to uphold certain desirable standards. That the clubs have the right to do this is not in dispute; what is unfortunate is when these standards – which are really about image– clash with the physical wellbeing of their members, particularly on course where they are engaged in the actual sporting activity.

Footwear regulations in golf clubs are pretty standard from one to another. Please wear conventional or regulation golf shoes on course, no thongs, no runners, and so on.

But here's the rub: what actually IS a "conventional" golf shoe?

Manufacturers, pros, club managers, players - all struggle to answer, mainly because the margins have blurred.

According to Peter Marks, Brand Manager for Niblick, manufacturer of golf shoes since the century before last, 15 years ago their biggest seller was the classic brogue with leather sole and full leather upper. Now, in Australia their range consists of just two classic men's styles and one women's; the rest are sports-shoe styled.

"Sports shoes have become more mainstream generally because people find them more comfortable," he said. The trend is also a reflection of society's more casual lifestyle as well as reflecting that newer entrants into the golf shoe market - think Nike, adidas, Puma - come from an athletic shoe background and that modern golf is an athletic activity.

Without an absolute definition on what is or is not a conventional golf shoe, what are the poor golfers with sore feet and/or bad backs supposed to do? For many of them, the answer is wear whatever is comfortable, whatever gets them round, and steer clear of the manager's office.

Well, not every manager. Asked whether there is room to move on footwear regulations, Paul Rak, CEO of Royal Melbourne Golf Club, said, "Of course. If someone comes to see us and says I cannot wear these because I have fallen arches or something, as long as they're not too outlandish and don't damage the greens, we don't have an issue at all."

When Jenny Hoff, President of WGV, underwent ankle surgery a few years ago, she approached her home club, Kingswood, with a medical certificate to use a cart and a verbal request to wear sports shoes. Both were allowed. Kingswood's regulations, incidentally, begin with the sensible codicil "Unless otherwise approved by management..."

What a shame this has not been the happy experience for Bill and Jane and so many others.

Fact: feet work hard on a golf course. This is largely underestimated until problems develop. Mark Jans, physiotherapist and orthotist at the Melbourne Golf Injury Clinic with a special interest in golf biomechanics, said, “Your foot is your foundation and if it’s not functioning properly, it reflects up the chain....knee, hip, back problems. Similarly, if there’s dysfunction in the spine it can refer down the leg and interfere with foot function.”

Fact: while golf shoe technology is designed to enhance golf performance, biomechanically there is no issue in wearing sports shoes or walkers. The only concern is traction on wet or uneven ground.

Fact: manufacturers make for the market. Troubled feet frequently cause fitting difficulties, especially on the women’s side where sales are in ratio only 1:5 and foot problems are more prevalent.

Fact: most damage to greens is caused by metal spikes and some ripple soles. Sports shoes and flat soled walkers are harmless.

Fact: the game’s governing authorities have no issue with athletic shoes and certainly not in the case of golfers with troublesome feet. Claire Bates: “The R&A’s position on golfers with disabilities and illnesses is to try and keep them in the game whenever possible.”

Fact: the bulk of golf club members are Baby Boomers, the largest wedge in the population and the major part of the market, not just for their club but for the entire golf industry – and for years to come. It makes sense to keep them playing – and spending – for as long as possible.

Fact: the potential for a discrimination claim exists, with the Human Rights Commission having already successfully conciliated on cases related to cart usage.

The P-word – participation – is all the thing in golf these days. It is on the up, but club membership is not. Various reasons have been espoused for this but one thing clubs don’t want to admit is their own part in it – the culture of stuffy and pedantic regulations that puts young people off joining and sends others packing if they are deemed non-conforming.

Fred Couples is a long way from being the only golfer with a physical problem. Wayne Grady has chronic bad feet and wears only sneakers and sports shoes when he plays. And legend of the U.S. Women’s Tour Mickey Wright underwent foot surgery before playing out the rest of her brilliant career in soft shoes.

Out there in the heartland, Bill and Jane and Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice want to do the same.

Really, it’s just common sense to let them.