The enduring photo from the 1995 British Open was a picture of John Daly in a classic follow-through pose, a driver wrapped around his neck with the head of the club clearly in view.

Daly had stormed the Old Course at St. Andrews, Scotland, with his booming drives and his pulsating playoff victory over Constantino Rocca. When Daly reached the tee of the 72nd hole late on Sunday afternoon, Jack Nicklaus, then in the broadcast booth to provide analysis for ABC Sports, urged Daly not to hit his driver on the short par 4.

Daly, obviously, didn't hear him, booming another one off the tee and sending the teeming crowd into a tizzy.

Manufactured by Wilson, Daly’s driver was called an Invex (TM). It had an odd-shaped, pear-like head.

Wilson was ready to pounce on Daly’s resurgence and the new club with a new set of Invex irons and mass production of the driver. A story in the Chicago Tribune six months later, around Christmas, waxed on about how Wilson was hoping to hit it big with the driver. The Invex driver, the story said, “could be the next step for the serious golfer,” and it quoted an executive who said that Wilson had 1,500 orders from Japan, a demand that was unprecedented.

Today, you can buy that same driver on eBay. Price? How does $4.99 sound?

The Invex never took off and subsequently, the irons, which were going to
have a nontraditional design, never made it to market.

“The design was a little too radical,” said Bob Thurman, director of research and development for Wilson Golf.

The moral of that tale is that unusual designs, regardless of the marketing claims that accompany them, don’t necessarily sell. That holds true at Wilson and Tour Edge, Chicago’s two primary club manufacturers, and every other clubmaker around the world.

For Thurman, the lesson served as one of his guiding lights for club design. The club needs to look good, but more importantly, it needs to perform well. You can’t have one without the other.

“With great design, you want to push the bubble while not alienating mainstream golfers,” he said.

Golf design has changed radically since the mid-’90s, when the big race involved finding the hottest technology.

Launch monitors, computer-assisted design programs and automation in general has made the design business less personal and more scientific.

“It used to be more like a laboratory of garage shop tinkerers,” Thurman said. “We were looking for something to make the club perform better. It’s not so much like that anymore. You’re not welding a hunk of iron onto steel. You’re prototyping things.”

That’s not to say that inspiration doesn’t come in strange ways sometimes.

The concept for Wilson’s Fat Shafts, irons that hit the market in the late ’90s, were conceived when a designer turned the shaft of a club upside down and turned over the hosel. The idea was to give players a wider sweet spot. A study by Wilson showed that when players mishit the ball, it occurred toward the toe around 85 percent of the time.

Thurman called Fat Shafts a “toe-friendly club” that expanded the sweet spot further away from the center of the head, and the idea turned out to be a hit. Fat Shafts turned out to be hugely popular for Wilson.

Today, the driving force for new clubs at Wilson is primarily data driven.

It can take up to two years for a club
to hit the market after it has been conceived and gone through layers of design and consumer testing at Wilson. In contrast, Thurman’s design time can be quite theoretical and tedious.

Thurman says he often spends days and weeks trying to get an extra yard or two out of a ball by “tweaking dimples to the four-decimal point. That can make a significant difference in the way the ball flies.”

Thurman knows this because he was on the cutting edge of helping to develop urethane covers for golf balls for Wilson.

David Glod, the founder and president of Chicago’s other primary club manufacturer, Tour Edge, said the business has changed radically since the days when graphite shafts and titanium were introduced to the marketplace.

“That was probably the best thing that ever happened to golf club makers,” Glod said.

Glod’s early days as a golf professional were spent refinishing wooden heads and resharing clubs, mostly for aesthetic purposes. Now, when research and development departments contemplate possible improvements to clubs, it is mostly about length.

Titanium and graphite, along with the switch from balata golf balls to urethane, were the impetus for what has
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turned out to be the golden age for distance. Over the course of nearly 20 years, since 1990, the average drive on the PGA Tour is up almost 10 percent—by 21 yards, to 284 yards.

Thurman does see a day soon when the frantic race for more distance slows down. Already, statistics on the PGA Tour for driving distances have leveled off, hovering in a four-yard range over the last five years.

That, however, won’t change the need for innovation.

“The USGA has put some serious governors in effect for golf balls and clubs,” said Thurman. “But it’s like when it rains and you dam a stream of water. The water goes in 400 different directions. That’s how technology moves.”

Thurman sees the new wave of clubs as more visually pleasing and more forgiving. Wilson’s most unique club for 2009 is called the FYbrid, which is a stylish cross between a wood and hybrid.

“If you look at clubs today, they are a lot more sexy than they were in the mid-’90s,” Thurman said.

Glod isn’t quite sure that clubmakers have maxed out on optimum distance for the average golfers.

When Tour Edge unveiled its Exotics line of fairway woods a couple of years ago, it did so with a claim that the 3-wood was 20 yards longer than any of its competition.

“The USGA rules do make it more difficult,” he said. “I see it coming more in shaft technology and new material designs.”

That is not to say that 10 years down the road, a saavy consumer won’t be able to find clubs with this wizardry at a bargain-basement price.

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