

# Rankmark scores in testing test

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**I**ndependent golf club testing always has been a murky, messy, muddled pursuit. Few have done it well. Few have done it meticulously. Few have done it honestly.

But this may be changing.

The mission of independent testers is to compare products from different manufacturers, not to be confused with those companies who conduct testing only for individual manufacturers.

A company called Rankmark, the best-known of the independent testing companies, uses hundreds of real golfers and thrives on head-to-head testing of golf clubs. The results of these tests are available without charge at founder Charlie Mandel's Web site, [www.rankmark.com](http://www.rankmark.com).

The Rankmark site is one of dozens of Web sites that compare and evaluate golf clubs. These Internet testers walk a delicate tightrope, because they often rely on advertising revenue or other support from the manufacturers whose equipment they test.

Mandel, to his credit, seems to have mastered at least one part of the equation – the honesty part – and appears to be flirting with success in other pieces of the testing pie. Still, opinions vary widely.

Callaway Golf, for one, never has fully cooperated with Mandel (by refusing, for example, to supply equipment free of charge). Callaway officials remain suspicious, with one of them saying, "Anytime that warped information can be presented to the public as fact, we get worried."

Added Larry Dorman, Callaway's senior vice president of global public relations: "We rely on our extensive player testing, which includes data gathered from the many golfers of all handicap levels who go through our fitting process at various locations. We see no need to use outside data at this time."

On the other hand, Chip Brewer, president of Adams Golf, lauds Mandel.

"I've got a lot of respect and admiration for Rankmark's work," Brewer said. "At times we agree with it and at times we have not. However, if there is one thing that I'm now sure of, it is that statistically relevant golf equipment testing is as difficult to do as it is rare. As a result, many

organizations offer personal opinion that is passed off as fact-based and relevant research. Rankmark avoids this pitfall and, while there is always room for improvement, I view them as the best independent consumer testing group in golf."

Mandel, whose business is headquartered on Florida's west coast, appears indifferent to either criticism or praise.

"I could give a damn what they think," Mandel said of golf club manufacturers. "I provide a valuable service, and I never fudge on the results. They are what they are."

For example, here are Mandel's published recommendations for the best irons, organized by handicap and listed in alphabetical order:

▶ ▶ **0-9:** Cleveland TA7, Mizuno MP-30, Ping G2, Titleist DCI 762.

▶ ▶ **10-19:** Adams Idea, Cobra SS-i Oversized, Hogan Apex Edge CFT, Ping G2.

▶ ▶ **20 and above:** Callaway Big Bertha, Nike Slingshot, TaylorMade RAC OS.

How did Mandel arrive at these results? In the same way he arrives at all his conclusions: He rounded up several hundred amateur golfers and asked them to start hitting different clubs. Then he asked for their opinions.

Nike might be boiling mad that its Slingshot iron barely missed a top ranking in the 0-9 and 10-19 handicap categories, which would have given the iron a clean sweep in the three handicap groupings. Mandel doesn't care.

"I report what the testers tell me," he said. "We use no less than 200 golfers in our testing. We have a pool of thousands. We have tested at five locations around the country.

"Our purpose is to have every manufacturer on an even playing field. Then we see if there is any difference. A lot of times, there is no discernible difference."

Mandel tests irons and woods from virtually all manufacturers. Little-known KZ Golf scored exceptionally well in iron testing for the 0-9 and 10-19 handicap categories, while virtual unknown

Giant Golf logged a solid performance in the 20-and-over category.

In a recent driver test, Mandel had more than 30 brands for his testers to evaluate. Test parameters always are precisely stated. Mandel generally uses one of three basic tests.

▶ ▶ **Test No. 1:** Testers hit drivers that are arranged in groups of five. Each tester is asked to pick the top two in each group. The groups of drivers keep changing, but the golfers always are asked to pick two of the five.

▶ ▶ **Test No. 2:** A match-play format is used, with testers asked to pick a winner in each showdown of two drivers.

▶ ▶ **Test No. 3:** Distance and dispersion are measured, and results are mathematically determined.

Mandel is adamant that he is not trying to fool anyone. One driver that has ranked consistently high among all handicap categories is a driver from a financially troubled company, GolfGear. The firm's Tsunami driver has produced positive results among a broad range of golfers.



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Rankmark founder Charlie Mandel says he is "trying to give people something they can believe. That's all."

"It is not my job to destroy a company by pointing out they did badly," Mandel said. "It's my job to point out who did well."

The driver that is emerging as the best overall among major manufacturers?

Mandel won't limit himself to one driver, but he revealed that the Cleveland Launcher has been a favorite of many testers.

Who is this man, and how does Rankmark produce income?

Mandel, 69, moved to Florida 10 years ago with his wife, Arlene. He was curious about golf clubs and started testing them. He invited his friends to become testers, and they invited their friends, and eventually he had thousands.

"Charlie went from being retired to being retarded," Arlene is fond of joking.

In his business career, Mandel sold magazine advertising (for publications such as *Omni*, where he was advertising and marketing director) and became a publisher (for magazines such as *Madison Avenue*, *Media Week* and *Media People*). He also was employed by the Israeli government as a public relations expert.

Golf manufacturers do not pay Mandel to conduct his independent testing, although Rankmark does run proprietary testing at the request of several manufacturers. The fee is \$5,000 to \$10,000, depending on the scope of the test.

As Rankmark has grown, so has its testing universe. While most of the income-producing proprietary testing is focused on prototype clubs, shoes and sunscreen are now being tested for specific manufacturers.

Mandel's Web site also accepts advertising from golf companies. The site is where Rankmark's overall test results and recommendations are posted.

"We don't charge much, so they line up to buy the ads," Mandel said. "I don't care who they are. Buying an ad doesn't buy results in our tests."

Noting that golf is a diversion in a world full of serious issues, Mandel said, "In what I laughingly call my new career, I became the world's leading authority on nothing."

Regardless, this is the man who is changing independent golf testing.

"Golf testing has not been credible," Mandel said. "I'm trying to give people something they can believe. That's all."