

The Grip Evolution

Big Decision, Lots of Choices

What makes the golf grip so important? It just happens to be the only contact point between the golfer and the club, and that makes it an integral part of the equipment. Still, it's amazing how important the grip is to some golfers, while it carries very little weight with others. I've seen players' bags with a sorry assortment of grips in various conditions, wear and sizes. How can they achieve a consistent feel for each club, if grasping each one requires a different hold? When fitting golf equipment, we are pursuing continuity within the set. A set of clubs accompanied by the perfect grip size and design establishes comfort, relaxation and confidence. The last thing any golfer should be thinking about over a shot is adjusting to a club's grip.

Golf grips have evolved from leather wrapped around and nailed to wooden shafts, to modern synthetic materials designed to impart comfort, reduce vibration and be tacky in the rain. While not all grips excel in each of these conditions, the least a golfer should be looking for is comfort. A suitable grip allows them to hold the club with light pressure. As Sam Snead always said, "imagine you are trying to hold a bird in your hands," with enough pressure to contain it without hurting it. The best grip for any given golfer is the one that enables them to accomplish this delicate feat.

Today there are many styles and compositions of grips from which to choose. The simple question of "leather or rubber" has evolved into a series of decisions that involve different types of material, durometers, texture choices and fashion colors that go way beyond the traditional black.

So how do you go about selecting the proper type of grip to play with? Unlike fitting irons for the proper lie angle or shafts based on your swing speed, grip selection is a personal choice. Optimal grip size can be measured, but style selection is completely subjective to each individual. Still, it's important for clubmakers to know what's out there, so let's take a look at the different grip styles currently available.

As technology in materials and manufacturing processes advances, so do product styles and options. Golf grips are definitely affected by this. Over the past decade, the number of grip styles and types has expanded rapidly. For starters, we have seen the demise of the traditional leather grip. Golfers now expect better performance through material technology, which leather cannot offer. Grips are manufactured today from two primary materials, natural rubber and ethylene propylene diene monomer (EPDM) elastomer. EPDM grips are also referred to as synthetic or polymer grips.

Rubber & Cord Grips

Natural rubber grips have been used for over half a century. Their styling has changed over the years, but their basic compositions have mainly stayed the same: the all-rubber grip, the cord grip (which has cotton string impregnated into it) or a combination of rubber and cord. These styles have commonly been referred to as either rubber or cord grips, respectively.

The all-rubber composition has a softer feeling, according to most golfers, even though the rubber composition can be manufactured in a variety of durometers (hardnesses). Grips with cord in them have a much firmer feeling. The cord itself acts like an aggregate rock in concrete, strengthening the structure of the grip. Many golfers are drawn to the corded grips because of improved hand traction. This is especially true for golfers who experience sweaty palms or play frequently in humid or rainy conditions. The cord acts similarly to snow tires on a slippery road.

In recent years, the greatest advancement in natural rubber grip technology has been the expansion of available colors. For many decades, rubber grips were primarily black. Now through new processes, bright colors have been incorporated into the rubber. Manufacturing advances allow these rubber grips to be multi-colored, which has taken design styling to all-new levels.



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Synthetic Grips

The EPDM grips have undergone the fastest technology advances. While they have been around for two decades, the diversity of their designs has been very progressive. The EPDM material can be molded into a single-piece grip or used in multi-layered constructions. Polymer wrap styles are available, much in the same design as the traditional leather, wrapped grips, but with vibration-dampening materials and water-resistant surfaces. Some of the greatest advances in EPDM grips are single-seam designs constructed by wrapping an outer sheet over an underlisting, with a single seam on the grip's backside. The artwork that can be put on this style of grip is almost limitless.

EPDM grips generally are lighter than their rubber counterparts. To many golfers, they are softer and have greater torque, resulting in more twisting in the hands than with a natural rubber grip. However, there are now numerous EPDM designs that are quite firm. Many models are marketed as soft, medium or firm feel.

The Variables

While almost all golf grips are made of either natural or EPDM rubber, there are a variety of more specific ways to distinguish grips from one another.

Lightweight: Grips have been produced as light as 20 grams. However, due to their narrow wall thickness, these have a tendency to transmit harsh vibration. Thicker-walled grips have more material to dampen vibration and are much more popular. Some lightweight grip models are designed with cavities inside. This removes weight by leaving air pockets in place of the rubber, but still keeps wall thickness beefier.

Vibration Dampening: Internal cavities are also a means of dampening vibration in the grip, and they are oriented in channels running either parallel or perpendicular to the shaft. Materials constructed of different durometers (hardnesses) are married together to control

