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## High tech company takes a swing at golf industry



ABI PHOTO / SARAH KERVER

Alex Gabbi, chief operating officer, says executives initially wondered whether they could build SmartSwing Inc's product.

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As a fairly new golfer, Dick Eyestone had thrown hours of practice and lessons into achieving a 15 handicap.

Then he hit a plateau. And after weeks of taking what seemed to be the same lesson from a pro, he realized that millions of other golfers have the same problem.

So he aimed to design a club that could sound an alarm whenever a golfer's swing moved in an arc that would result in a poor drive.

The club, which has sensors built into the shaft, looks and feels like an ordinary driver. But it also comes with computer software that tracks the data from the sensors and analyzes a golfer's swing.

"First, I had to see if the technology was out there," Eyestone says. "I didn't know if the sensors out there were small enough to fit in a golf club."

They were, and he spent \$55,000 of his own money to research the product's development.

Now, with two rounds of angel funding creating a total investment of more than \$1.5 million, SmartSwing Inc. plans to ship its first product in July.

Eyestone says most of the investors were golfers who had the technical experience to understand the product's possibilities. Eyestone sits on the boards of two publicly held tech companies in Austin — TippingPoint Technologies Inc. and Crossroads Systems Inc.

Alex Gabbi, chief operating officer of SmartSwing and founder of several tech startups, says he joined SmartSwing because it combines two things he loves — technology and sports.

"It's interesting, because with most of the companies I've worked with, there has been a market challenge. Essentially we've asked, 'Can we sell this product?' But with this company the challenge was, 'Can we build it?'"

SmartSwing employs 14 people and has signed an agreement to have Focus Golf Systems Inc. — which manufactures Dunlop golf clubs — produce the clubs under the SmartSwing brand name. Rick Gray, director of product development for Dunlop, says he received an email about SmartSwing and thought it sounded unique, so he decided to take a look.

"I receive hundreds of emails a week, but this thing had some legitimacy to it. So I contacted them, and the rest is history," Gray says. "I think it's going to do really well, and

there's nothing like it in the marketplace right now. Golfers are like fisherman — they'll try anything."

Eyestone is counting on golfers' love of anything new. His company plans to charge nearly \$700 for the club, which would be sold through the golf pros who teach the most serious golfers how to improve their swings.

For now, he's focused on getting club professionals to use the high tech clubs in lessons — hoping that customers will follow suit. He's marketing it as something similar to the video and electronic training a golfer can receive in stores such as Austin-based Golfsmith International Inc. or with tech-savvy pros.

Andy Craig, a spokesman for Golfsmith, says the retailer's recent deal with Englewood, Colo.-based video training company, GolfTEC Inc., was signed because golfers were demanding high tech education services.

"They are moving more toward the high tech elements that will help them enhance their swings and enhance their learning, but they are not willing to sacrifice the touch of a PGA pro," Craig says. "If you can blend those two things, that will help golfers move to the next level."

The golf market has about 6 million serious golfers who play 16 rounds or more a year, and those golfers account for 80 percent of the spending on golf products, according to information from Kissimmee, Fla.-based golf research firm Golf Datatech LLC.

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