COMMENTARY

Should other courses follow Augusta National's lead?

As I was walking up to the 18th tee at Augusta National during the practice rounds at the Masters, I stumbled upon Tom Fazio explaining the changes he made to the hole to CBS announcers Jim Nantz and Ken Venturi. That’s when it struck me: how much armchair greens committee architects watching this year’s telecast would be left with the impression that they, too, needed to lengthen their course?

With increasing golf ball and club technology, many courses are already adding length and new courses are getting longer and longer. While the effects of the 285 yards that were added to Augusta National were impossible to gauge due to wet conditions, the changes made to golf’s Mecca fanned the flames of the technology vs. tradition debate. Not only did Augusta National add length, using land from adjacent Augusta Country Club in the process, but Masters chairman Hootie Johnson also stopped just short of endorsing a limited-flight “tournament golf ball.”

While many in the golf industry are tiring of this ongoing argument, the fact remains that increasing technology and other factors are altering the game to some degree. However, as this month’s Point/Counterpoint feature and News Poll illustrate (see below and page 7), the industry is still firmly divided over what, if anything, should be done about the problem.

There is no doubt that professional golfers are hitting the ball longer, but tweaking layouts for professional events has been going on for years. The big question is how technology will impact the average golfer and the 15,000 plus average golf courses in the country. Unfortunately, there isn’t much hard data on this. Most of the “evidence” that technology is purely anecdotal or based on unwieldy assumptions or estimates.

Are a majority of high-handicappers also hitting the ball 50 yards farther right and expecting homeowners relaxing on their patios? Or is the high-handicapper playing more golf because he can drive the ball 50 yards farther right down the middle? The last thing the industry needs is another survey, but quantifying the problem would be better than making unnecessary changes (to both golf courses and equipment) to solve what could just be a misconception or misperception.

Speaking of using hard data to assess the severity of a problem, check out John Strawn’s review of Bjorn Lomborg’s “The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World” (see page 18). According to Lomborg’s assessment of the data on environmental problems, it turns out that the environment on the whole is actually getting better, not worse. The golf industry has known this for some time, but unfortunately there is a body of data that provides an alternative perspective to the usual gloomy environmental scenario.

Here at Golf Course News, we never stop counting. Turn back to page 28 for a listing of the 40 industry professionals quoted in this issue.

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How has the golf ball harmed golf?

By WALTER UIHLEIN

For the past 70 years the United States Golf Association and the Royal & Ancient have had performance controls in place concerning the golf ball. These performance controls have included limitations on size and weight (adopted 1955), velocity (adopted 1942) and overall distance (adopted 1976). At the same time the performance controls on golf clubs did not occur until 1998.

To discuss and debate a “limited flight ball” is to conclude that the golf ball is the cause of some current problem. If there is a problem, the golf ball is not the cause.

PLAYERS ARE BIGGER, STRONGER AND LONGER

The cause is a combination of stronger competitors and better clubs. In 1992, the average height and weight of the 125 exempt players on the U.S. PGA Tour was six feet and 180 pounds. Today the average height and weight of 125 exempt players on the U.S. PGA Tour is six feet two inches and 195 pounds. In 1992 the average clubhead speed (and the ability to generate distance) involved the player and the club. The golf ball has not been hit yet.

The 1992 Masters Champion was Fred Couples, who stood 5 feet 11 inches tall, weighed 180 pounds and could barely bench press 550 pounds, while the 2002 Masters Champion Tiger Woods is 6 feet 3 inches tall, weighs 205 pounds and bench presses 690 pounds. The 1992 Masters Champion Tiger Woods is 6 feet 3 inches tall, weighs 205 pounds and bench presses 690 pounds.

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Drawing a line in the sand

By DAMIAN PASCUZZO

As golf course architects we are trained to be problem solvers. Given a piece of land, along with a list of development constraints and the client’s goals and budget, we set out to design the best course possible. That’s our job and we’ll continue to do it the best way we can. But how about a little help from our friends making all of these new high-tech clubs and balls?

Has anyone seen how far people are hitting it today? No, I’m not talking about the tour pros. We all know how they pulverize the ball. I’m referring to the high-school kids, the 20-somethings, and all those other flat-bellied golfers to whom a 280-yard drive is the rule, not the exception. No doubt about it, it’s fun to watch even a recreational golfer catch one on the sweet spot and send it sailing off onto the fairway. But its downright ugly when that same player hooks or slices. We’re no longer concerned only about the houses that border the fairways. Now we have to worry about the houses that sit across the street from the houses that border the fairway.

Over the last 10 years, designers have gradually increased the width of corridors for a safe golf hole. Where will it end? Left unchecked, how far will players be hitting the ball in 10 years? How about in 20? Is it not unusual for the planning and permitting process for a new golf course to take 10 years, not to mention at least two years for construction and grow-in. If today’s focus on power golf continues, it is conceivable the acreage allotted for golf courses in the country will double in the next 10 years.

One of our ASGCA members prepared a detailed analysis on the effects of increased distance, and the results are disturbing. If the architect must provide more land (at least 10 percent) for the ball 50 yards farther right down the middle? The last thing the industry needs is another survey, but quantifying the problem would be better than making unnecessary changes (to both golf courses and equipment) to solve what could just be a misconception or misperception.

Speaking of using hard data to assess the severity of a problem, check out John Strawn’s review of Bjorn Lomborg’s “The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World” (see page 18). According to Lomborg’s assessment of the data on environmental problems, it turns out that the environment on the whole is actually getting better, not worse. The golf industry has known this for some time, but unfortunately there is a body of data that provides an alternative perspective to the usual gloomy environmental scenario.

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Organic management plan offers best results

To the Editor,

Here at Lahontan Golf Club, we strive to be 100 percent organic through sustainable agriculture, by feeding the soil, not the plant! "Organic golf activists score major victory" GCN April 2002 and "The time for organic golf has arrived" GCN May 2002.

Our results have provided exceptional turf conditions, however, we realize that the definition of organic vs. inorganic can be subjective and is open to discussion. Synthetic vs. organic is easy to understand, but if a golf course over applies "organics" to the course, it could still result in leaching and runoff of phosphorus and nitrogen, requiring additional best management practices and mitigation to avoid contamination of waterways. Therefore, through all of this, management is pivotal to success, even if the course is organic.

I think Neil Lewis hits the point on the head by describing an "Organic Management Plan. "That implies the use of non-synthetic fertilizers coupled with a management plan that understands the agriculture of turf grass wholly and holistically.

Take care,

Marilyn Hoffmann
DMI/Highlands Group, LLC
Truckee, Calif.

Moss article covered bases

Editor's note: The following is contributor Kevin Ross' response to Neil Goldberg's letter in last month's issue that raised several questions about Ross' article, "Moss hits Colorado hard, more research needed" (GCN April 2002).

To the Editor,

I would like to address a few issues from Neil Goldberg's response and offer additional information concerning the Colorado moss problem.

As far as the Ultra Down issue, I stated that Ultra Down gave the most consistent results, which is absolutely correct. The Oregon State study is the only study that had poor results using Ultra Down. However, their technique used Ultra Down as a broadcast application through a boom sprayer and not a drench application. It is widely believed that the broadcast application was the reason for the ineffectiveness. In Frank Dobie's Moss Network (cited in Goldberg's letter), Ultra Down was determined as the most effective control for moss. As far as the discoloration issue, the research shows that only slight discoloring happens with temperatures above 80 degrees. This is consistent with most all products, including Terracyte.

On the subject of research, I did mention Dr. Frank Rossi at Cornell University as a site where independently funded research was taking place. Rossi's conclusions to date showed Junction ranked first and Terracyte ranked second in his trials to control moss. Neither of these products are a one-time fix for moss and neither provided 100 percent control.

Concerning Terracyte, the article did indicate that Terracyte was one of the potential products that looked promising. I also stated, as did Dr. Koski, and Matt Nelson, USGA, at the symptom, that more research is certainly needed. As mentioned above, Terracyce has only been used in university research by Dr. Rossi, with quantifiable results.

The climactic conditions in Colorado are certainly much different than that of Ithaca, N.Y. It appears there will be moss research conducted at Colorado State University, led by Dr. Koski, starting this season. This research will be sponsored by the Rocky Mountain Golf Course Superintendents Association.

The purpose of the article was to call attention to a problem that requires additional research and a solution. I interviewed many superintendents at the symposium, and most all stated they went home more confused than when the article arrived. This should tell everyone something concerning moss.

In addition, we need to find a cure-all for moss, no matter what product it is, and no matter who makes it. Best regards,

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