Get real: Set your own speed

Does speed thrill or does speed kill? When it comes to maintaining greens, that is the central question. However, the answer is far from clear-cut.

When we set out to write about putting green management for this issue, we were surprised at the hornet’s nest of emotions that were stirred up when we posed that question to everyone from architects to superintendents.

The issue is so thorny we went through more industry insiders trying to get someone to weigh in on the side of speed than a porcupine has quills. In our GCN Newspoll, nearly 65 percent of respondents said increased green speed was bad for the game of golf.

Why, then, are superintendents continually lowering cutting heights and pushing their turf to the limit to get faster and faster greens when many of them don’t believe in it? Because golfers and members demand them, that’s why. As Kevin Ross notes in his story this month, mowing greens at 3/16 inch will get superintendents a pink slip these days (see story on page 8). Fast is fun and like rock ‘n roll, it’s here to stay.

Many blame NBC announcer Johnny Miller for calling greens that are Stimping at 12 feet slow. Heck, pin it on Augusta National for maintaining unrealistically slick greens. That’s the reason members are quipping, “Green is good, but fast is better,” and “I’d rather putt on fast dirt than slow greens,” right?

Speed has clearly gotten out of control if superintendents are going low just to keep their jobs. But as we discovered in our reporting this month, it’s not too late for superintendents to take control of speed and use the Stimpeter to their advantage.

As Ross points out in his story, technological advances have made faster greens possible, but how low can you go? One way to escape the cutting height limbo is to take the Stimpeter out of the closet (or buy one already) and use the damn thing. Follow the lead of Mike Morris at Crystal Downs (see story on page 1) and determine the optimum green speed for your particular course. By maintaining a range of green speeds day in and day out, Morris has eliminated complaints from members and come up with a realistic maintenance plan.

By keeping his greens within the optimum range, Morris has also gotten off the cutting height roller coaster. He no longer has to speed up greens for the member-guest and then field complaints from members when he goes back to maintaining “normal” conditions. I know this is easier said than done. It will take more than a scolding editorial to affect change. Golfers need to have their perspectives altered for them. Michi- gan State University’s Thom Nikolai is working on research that may do just that (see story on page 10). Under his proposal, we would no longer describe greens in terms of speed, but in terms of contour. Fast, medium and slow would be replaced with flat, undulating and severely contoured.

This change in thinking would take the pressure off everyone from architects to superintendents and give golfers a healthier perspective on the game. If we could only apply rational thinking to the distance debate...

Speed doesn’t have to kill
By JON SCOTT

Speed kills, right? At least that has been the mantra of superintendents and agronomists ever since courses started using the Stimpeter to gain bragging rights at the 19th hole rather than to get consistency in putting quality from green to green on the same golf course. At the risk of losing friends and getting hate mail, I’m going to stick my neck out and say speed does not necessarily kill.

Today we have at our disposal the means to grow and mow greens at heights and stress levels that would have made the greenkeepers of old go into early retirement. Superintendents do this as a matter of daily routine without giving it a second thought.

What sacrilegious tripe are you throwing about here, Mr. Scott? I’m trying to say that everything is relative, and at different times in the history of golf course maintenance, there have been breakthroughs that have allowed for faster greens without sacrificing turf health.

When I started growing and killing grass over 30 years ago, my 328 bermuda greens were mowed at a whopping 3/16 inch. On special occasions, I dared to go down to 1/4 inch, but only for short periods. Green speed, if you could call it that, was probably somewhere between four and five feet, but we didn’t measure it that way; we just tossed the ball toward the hole and watched where it stopped. Some of the greens were so steeply sloped that the turf didn’t stop, and you had to get your driver out to put it back uphill. This was golf in 1972.

Why didn’t we stay at 1/4 inch? Because a few superintendents dared to trim their 328 down to 3/32 inch with the new nine-blade reels and the golfers loved it. This drove a demand for a turfgrass that would hold - Continued on next page

Speed is not good for game
By MIKE DEVRIES

Contrary to the desires of many contemporary golfers, blistering green speeds do not increase the enjoyment we derive from the game. In fact, super-fast greens actually reduce options for attacking the hole, making golf less interesting and also, in many instances, unnecessarily difficult.

Don’t get me wrong, fast greens can be fun when they force golfers to make a longer comeback putt after misjudging the first, but if players are consistently in fear of the ball rolling off the green, then things are out of hand.

Green speeds frequently become a problem on older courses when the greens are resurfaced with new varieties of bentgrass that are going low just to keep their turf jobs. But as we discovered in our reporting this month, it’s not too late for superintendents to take control of speed and use the Stimpeter to their advantage.

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Povec to lead Golf Course News
New publisher announces renovation of the year award

Before I introduce myself as the new publisher of Golf Course News, I have a special announcement to make.

With course openings on the decline in the United States, renovation work is becoming a major source of business for architects and builders. In fact, several companies who entered the 2002 Golf Course News Builder of the Year Awards will be busier this year than last because of increased renovation work.

Another hot-button issue in the industry is golf and the environment. Many organizations and courses are setting ambitious goals for meeting environmental standards, including Audubon International's 50 in Five campaign to sign up half the courses in the United States within five years’ time (GCN, Jan. 2002).

Recognizing the emerging importance of these two issues, we here at Golf Course News are announcing this month our Renovation of the Year Award (see ad on page 25), the first of which will be given in February 2004. GCN will solicit proposals from recently remodeled golf courses and have them judged by a panel of industry experts. The award will be given to the golf course and its superintendent. Special recognition will also be given to the course architect, builder and operating vendors, with an emphasis on environmental enhancements.

As for your new publisher, my name is Jim Povec and my first job in life was caddying and cutting greens at Sleepy Hollow Country Club in Brecksville, Ohio. Since those early days, I've spent most of my career managing magazines, trade shows or Web sites with companies such as Forbes magazine, IDG, Softbank and Ziff-Davis.

My passion and my vocation finally meet here at Golf Course News. I am committed to a healthier golf course industry, giving way to more ideas like the Renovation of the Year Award. I am committed to faster play, which is an editorial focus of this issue. I am also committed to introducing more new players to the game, especially young players.

And finally, I am committed to prove that more investment in putting greens as flat as billiard tables - everywhere. Flat greens are completely devoid of contours, to be retained and contoured. That doesn't mean always, and never should. There will always be rooms to mow grass higher and accept slower green speeds when environmental conditions warrant. Further, if you don't have the new grasses and equipment at your course, mowing close to produce fast greens will be detrimental to your mental health. But don't blame Augusta, Bethpage or Muirfield Village for showing just how much skill it takes to get a ball in the hole on glass surfaces. Admit it; you like to see these guys challenged with fast greens. And, if you are really honest with yourself, you'll say you enjoy the excitement of putting when the ball takes one more half turn before it stops and falls in the hole. Speed doesn't have to kill if you have the right grass.

Jim Scott is the vice president of agronomy for the PGA Tour.

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Speed = Excitement

Continued from previous page

up under that absurdly low mowing height, and the market for Fidlaw was born. The same thing happened with bentgrass, only with height and the market for lower mowing heights and better feeling turf. It is just pure fun to believe everything you hear), I mean how many times has Bob Harriman from Scotts Co. talked about on TV (and don't be so honest with yourself, you'll say you enjoy the excitement of putting when the ball takes one more half turn before it stops and falls in the hole. Speed doesn't have to kill if you have the right grass.

Mike DeVries is the principal of the golf course architecture firm DeVries Design Inc. He is based in Traverse City, Mich.

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MAILBAG: MORE COURSES SHOULD JOIN AUDUBON

TO THE EDITOR:
You raise an excellent question in your editorial (GCN, March 2003). Are most golf courses in line with Audubon International and are they already practicing IPM? I think that the answer is yes. I am in the process of becoming certified through Audubon International and have found that my IPM program fulfills many of the requirements. What superintendent doesn't watch weather conditions and scout to monitor disease pressure? More and more golf courses are updating to centrally controlled irrigation, installing environmentally responsible wash areas and building safer chemical storage facilities. Inviting a local school to participate in creating naturalized areas, putting up some bird houses and mapping your golf course are the additional requirements.

Why don't more superintendents write up a plan to fulfill these things, have it approved, then go back and implement and document that they are actually accomplishing these goals? Because it is time-consuming and can appear to be a lot of paper work just to prove what we already know and do at our facility.

However, I recently witnessed a county official state that “we all know golf courses pollute.” What will his response be when I tell him we are a Certified Sanctuary and I have the documentation to prove it? I think it is worth heading off the critics.

Sincerely,
Scott Brooke, superintendent The Golf Club at Hawks Prairie Lacey, Wash.

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ROSE: OUR PLANTS WON'T PRODUCE TRANSGENIC POLLEN

TO THE EDITOR:
In a recent article ("Debate over Roundup Ready bent rages on" GCN, March 2003), Dr. Bob Harriman from Scotts Co. was quoted as saying, "Gene escape in male-sterile varieties is still possible because you still have fertility, gene flow and sexuality in half the system. It doesn't make it an ounce more real." Dr. Harriman does understand that the male-sterile Penn A-4 plants containing the transgene for herbicide resistance cannot contaminate the environment because they have no pollen. The only truth in Bob Harriman’s statement is that the seed we market will have some normal plants with normal pollen, which is no different from the Penn A-4 we market today. What needs to be clarified is that our transgenic plants will never produce fertile transgenic pollen. There lies the difference in our production practices. The Scotts/Monsanto production can and will pollinate, spreading transgenic glyphosate resistant pollen.

All the standard bent grass production practices noted in the article are adequate for seed containment and have proven satisfactory for normal certified seed production. The new problem that is now presented is pollen containment. There are approximately 6,000 pollen grains produced for each seed. With a pollen grain contributing half the DNA to a seed, and in this case carrying the Roundup gene, pollen containment is essential to prevent gene trespass to other Agrostis species. A study by Pure Seed Testing showed that transgenic pollen was received by Agrostis plants 3,000 feet away in the first year. The 11,000-acre control area does little good when pollen grains live one to three hours and the wind blows five miles per hour. Even with dedicated equipment, pollen trespass will contaminate the irrigation district and then move on to other areas in successive generations.

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CORRECTION

Due to a reporting error, GCN incorrectly stated that Hybrigen was working on developing male sterile glyphosate tolerant bentgrass ("Debate over Roundup Ready bent rages on" GCN March 2003) Hybrigen is working with male sterile glufosinate tolerant plants.

By raising mowing heights, steeply pitched and boldly contoured greens will be allowed to continue to do what they were designed to do: direct the strategy of a well-designed hole, reward well-struck approach shots and demand creativity and skill from golfers attempting to recover from their surr...