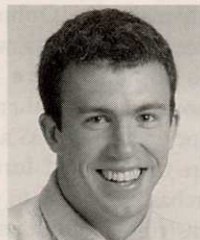


# Get real: Set your own speed

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.



Andrew Overbeck, editor

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,

its 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 Stimpmeter 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 Stimpmeter 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

done. It will take more than a scolding editorial to affect change. Golfers need to have their perspectives altered for them. Michigan 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



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

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...

## POINT

### 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 Stimpmeter 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 5/16 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 ball didn't stop, and you had to get your driver out to putt 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 5/32 inch with the new nine-blade reels and the golfers loved it. This drove a demand for a turfgrass that would hold



Jon Scott

Continued on next page

## COUNTERPOINT

### 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 demand shorter cutting heights in order to survive. Many greens designed and constructed during the pre-World War II era, when today's putting speeds were unfathomable, tend to feature steep slopes and bold contours. In many cases, when those original features are retained, the new turf cover has made such greens unplayable, which has, in turn, led many clubs and course owners to rebuild putting surfaces on a flatter pitch. As a result, the original, unique character of many older greens has been lost, simply to accommodate faster putting speeds.

In 1928, pioneer golf architect Charles Blair MacDonald, designer of the National Golf Links of America, wrote: "Putting greens to a golf course are what the face is to a portrait... the face tells the story and determines the character and quality of the portrait - whether it is good or bad." MacDonald's wisdom still applies today. Interesting greens are enjoyed by all classes of golfers. And, perhaps more importantly, such greens make each individual course distinctive.



Mike DeVries

Continued on next page

# GOLF COURSE NEWS

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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 participating 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 our golf courses means more revenues and more growth for the game. Please contact me at 207-846-0600, ext. 272, or e-mail me at [jpovec@golfcoursenews.com](mailto:jpovec@golfcoursenews.com).



Jim Povec, publisher



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## Speed = Excitement

Continued from previous page

up under that absurdly low mowing height and the market for Tifdwarf was born. The same thing happened with bentgrass, only with lesser gradients; that is until we took a quantum leap with L-93 and the A and G series in recent years.

What drove this march toward lower mowing heights and better grasses to withstand them? Excitement. It is just pure fun to putt on fast greens. I'm not talking about the 12-plus speeds they talk about on TV (and don't believe everything you hear), I mean a good, solid 10 feet on a well-contoured surface that tracks pure and feels firm. The current breed of greens grasses can do this far more often than those in past years without causing harm, and there is no turning back as far as the golfer is concerned.

Notice I said "far more often."

That doesn't mean always, and never should. There will always be reasons 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. ■

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

## 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 paperwork 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.

## 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 safer." Dr. Harriman does not 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 bentgrass 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.

Sincerely,  
Bill Rose, president  
Hybrigen, Turf-Seed and Tee-2-Green

## COOK DISPUTES ACTIVIST'S SCIENTIFIC CLAIMS

Editor's note: In response to several readers who questioned Jay Feldman's science in his Point "Golf contaminates environment" (GCN, March 2003), *Golf Course News* turned to Dr. Tom Cook, associate professor of horticulture at Oregon

Continued on page 29

## CORRECTION

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

## Faster is not better

Continued from previous page

Sadly though, if maintenance equipment technology and agronomic advancements continue to make even lower mowing heights possible, we'll certainly be left with putting greens as flat as billiard tables — everywhere. Flat greens are completely devoid of any interest and only test a golfer's ability to judge speed, rather than a combination of speed, slope and contour. The game will definitely suffer for it.

Instead of speed, emphasis should be placed on maintaining a true roll and a firm putting surface. In other words, as long as the green rewards a well-struck approach and the ball isn't bouncing off-line on its way to the hole, what does speed matter? Maintaining firm greens that roll true — as opposed to simply fast ones — will permit classic putting surfaces, with steep pitch and bold contours, to be retained and continue to provide the same challenge and enjoyment to contemporary golfers, and golfers of the future.

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 surrounds. And, moreover, in this age of environmental stewardship, a higher cut on the greens will yield a stronger grass plant, better able to ward off disease and drought without assistance from expensive artificial inputs.

Let's do what's best for golf. Being economically responsive and environmentally conscious in regard to putting speeds is not only smart — such an approach also yields many fringe benefits. The most interesting greens on older courses can be saved. And, even more exciting from my view, golf architects will be provided future opportunities to create new greens with distinct character. ■

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

## GOLF COURSE NEWS POLL

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Are ever-increasing green speeds good or bad for the game of golf?

