



In Bounds: Perception is Key

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As a child I remember road trips from sea to shining sea inside a Country Squire station wagon smooched between my brothers Curt and Rob. The blend of body odors (roll down the windows please), loud radial tires (a new product at the time) and many stops at Stuckys (for peanut brittle) made time zip by, as did the 75 mile per hour speed limit upon the interstate freeways. As a child in the late sixties I perceived that we were almost flying from city to city.

Then in 1973, shortly before I earned my driver's license, President Nixon put the kibosh on speed and dropped the limit to a 55 maximum in order to conserve gasoline, a precious resource. Wow, did it suddenly take a lot of time to get anywhere! Courtesy of fuel efficient cars, the limit was raised in 1986 to as high as 70 MPH dependent upon the road traveled. And there it remains today.

Compared to the mid-seventies, we are again moving quickly to our destinations, but compared to last week and the month before that and the year before that, 70 miles per hour has become a very standard and often perceived sloooow speed, especially judging from the many who drive in excess of the limit. But in reality, 70 miles per hour is 70 miles per hour.

Sometimes the journey goes fast, and sometimes slow dependent upon the weather, the travel into or away from the sun, the company kept and the fellow travelers upon the same highway. However, 70 miles per hour stays at 70 miles per hour. Maybe it is the perception of speed that changes dependent upon the attitude of the driver?

The seventies brought about another speed change. In 1977 the USGA introduced a tool to measure the speed, or how far a ball would roll from a furrowed, yardstick like device that releases a ball when tilted to a given pitch. Called a stimp meter, it was intended to be used to gauge the differences in speed from green to green in an effort to improve consistency. It has since been used to determine how fast a green will roll.

When first introduced, the range of speed broke down this way: slow = 4.5 feet, medium = 6.5 feet and fast = 8.5 feet. Remember that was during a day when greens were mowed at .25 inches and cultural practices were not as intense as they are today. In fact, player expectations were at a much different and lower level than they are now.

The current stimp meter ratings are slow = 6.5 feet, medium = 8.5 feet and fast = 10.5 feet. For the past several years and on a day to day basis during peak golfing periods, we have maintained a speed of 9.5 feet to 10.5 feet. Of course if weather conditions generate a surge in growth or we are forced to skip a day in the mowing cycle the greens will be slower than when we are on sched-

ule.

We maintain our greens at a speed considered pretty good by the USGA. Our height of cut is less than one eighth of an inch. We top dress regularly and roll the greens almost every day. Even through the implementation of these programs I still hear from some the comment that the greens seem slow. How can that be? Ten feet is ten feet. And to be honest, I am very conservative in my readings.

I believe that perception is the key to green speed. Green grass equates to slow speed. High humidity equates to slow green speed. Slow play equates to slow green speed. Tall rough equates to slow green speed. A bad round equates to slow green speed.

And just as relevant is the converse perception, tournament play equates to fast green speed, guest days equate to fast green speed and a good round equates to fast green speed.

It is funny how times have changed. For events such as guest days, championships and other special times, I can't just go out, double cut and or double roll and get the dramatic speed increases I could a decade ago. In the 1990's I could squeeze at least a foot or more from my surfaces in a pinch using a variety of methods. Then again, nine feet on the stimp was our daily goal.

Player perception and expectations have certainly raised the bar. By maintaining the greens at their limits we have lost our wiggle room, our ability to twist them up at a moments notice. On one hand it is nice to have reasonably consistent green speed, but on the other I sort of enjoyed putting the screws to the players, er I mean greens.

I remember hosting my first State Amateur back in 1985. Our "fast" nine foot greens

were slow mowed and double cut starting four days ahead of the event. According to my journal the speeds topped out at 12 feet and almost every one of the proposed final day cupping locations were lost. Two scores broke par during the whole event. Afterward I backed off of the greens and brought them quickly to somewhere around nine feet again.

Could I do that today with normal stimps somewhere around ten feet? Probably, but at what cost to the plants. Unlike in '85, I would not be allowed to decelerate them back to nine. What kind of a risk would I be willing to take for a short term boost in my ego?

Thus in reality, we don't do a whole lot different to our greens on a day to day basis to speed them up for special events. At the height of cut we maintain and the negative impacts upon the turf high speed creates, it isn't worth the short term gain. Especially since the long term health of the plant could be compromised. And any set back when managing on the edge is too risky for me. Besides, player perception of a "special event" adds six inches to my speed without taking a machine out of the shop.

Speed is like time. All too often perception overcomes reality. Sometimes my drive home seems to take an hour, but actually it only takes around 22 minutes. And at times when I cut cups the greens look slow, but after I stimp them I am brought back to reality, they are just fine.

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