

Food for Thought

Mr. Alexander M. Radko
USGA Green Section
Golf Course, Far Hills, N.J.

Dear Al,

I read with great interest your article "Green is not Great" in the August, 1977 issue of *Golf Journal*. Your observations of color vs. playing surface was probably the most unbiased discussion on this topic that I have ever read. Both sides of this argument were presented fairly. However, please allow me to relate some of my observations to possibly present another angle to this important topic:

Sadly, golf has changed considerably since the first hole was set into the ground in the British Isles during the 1400's. It began to mature in 1744 when the "Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers" formulated the first authenticated golf organization. This organization created 13 articles which became the original rules of golf.

In 1764, St. Andrews reduced its golf course from 22 holes to 18 holes. This reduction set the "standard" for subsequent golf courses. These events, I feel, were the birth of the game that we know as "golf" today. The rules were simple and needed no other interpretation. In those days there were no "special rulings" because one happened to be located behind an immovable obstruction or some other condition to warrant outside explanation. There were no provisions for "embedded balls" or "lift, clean and place;" there was no marking of "Ground Under Repair" to allow a player to drop his ball elsewhere. In fact, originally, only two rules needed to be followed. The golfer was required to: "Play the course as you find it, and play the ball as it lies" and: "You touch your ball when you tee it up and don't touch it again until you take it out of the hole."

What happened, Al? Why did golf make the changes of today? Today's golfer has his hands on the ball more often than not. He wants, and is allowed relief from nearly every unsatisfactory situation he confronts. I believe that changes were made because of pressure. You mention in your fine article that too many Golf

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Food for Thought

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Course Superintendents follow the path of least resistance "rather than stand up and say, 'You are wrong! My program is the best long-range direction for the club, we'll do it my way completely and totally!'" Well, I contend that the Golf Course Superintendent is not yielding to the pressure of his membership at all. He is merely following the dictates of the United States Golf Association itself, through the rules of golf!

Today, the United States Golf Association publishes large, yearly volumes of "Decision on the Rules of Golf by the U.S.G.A." At the very onset, why did they follow the path of least resistance rather than to rule as follows: "Play the course as you find it, and play the ball as it lies"? Today's golfer is not only allowed relief, but he can move his ball over 14 feet to secure designed relief (two club lengths for the drop and two more that the ball may roll after the drop). Why? The reason is simple. As golf processed into the United States, we Americans found the original rules of golf much too inequitable. "Rub of the Green" was more than we could endure. Today, "Rub of the Green" has been reduced to such items as hitting the ball further than anticipated and rolling into a hazard. And, even though this example has been accepted as the "Rub of the Green" of today, the Golf Course Superintendent will still suffer the blame, because the golf course was too dry!

Let's suppose that we did employ "survival of the

fittest" management on our golf courses. Obviously, there would be a good amount of "browned out" areas as well as areas of vigorous, healthy green turf. Proficient golfers, eventually landing in areas of "green growth" would complain about the unfairness of the situation... less than three feet away would have been a perfect lie on dormant grass, and here he is, on green grass. Conversely, the poor golfer would eventually find himself on the "browned out" area, neighboring the green turf he desires. How many times have you, myself, and all associated with golf course maintenance been subjected to this statement by the golfer, "I only ask one thing from a golf course... consistency!"

The United States Golf Association has also encouraged this attitude by the numerous rulings in the "Decisions on the Rules of Golf by the U.S.G.A." so that the game will be as "fair" for one player as it is for another. Because of this, golf has committed itself. Unless the rules of golf change drastically, then, as Golf Course Superintendents, we too, are committed to provide consistency throughout the golf course. To provide this dictated consistency, the Golf Course Superintendent has two alternatives. Either we kill all turf equally or we must make all turf similar in texture, color, and playability. Obviously, a golf operation with no turf has no chance for success, therefore, the Golf Course Superintendent strives for evenly textured turfgrass. The "by-product" of this "forced manage-

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ment" program is green, lush, vigorous turf, clipped daily to give it the consistency dictated by our membership and supported the United States Golf Association's Rules of Golf and subsequent decisions.

Al, there is an axiom in our profession that you are surely aware of: "Dead turf is not the problem, it is merely the result of another problem." This means that although we see the dead turf, we must realize that it died from some other reason . . . the true problem. It could have died from compaction, poor drainage, equipment damage, disease, overwatering, under-watering, and on and on through the innumerable other causes. From our training, we know that we will never have healthy turf, unless the true problem is corrected, otherwise the turf will never have a chance for survival.

Following this line of thinking, I contend that the extensive management programs employed in golf course maintenance are not the problem. From my side of the fence I see today's management programs as the result of the dictates of the United States Golf Association itself, through it's rules and "decisions" . . . the striving for equitable playing conditions. This quest for consistency has caused golf course management to strive for today's ultimate manicuring of the golf course. Very honestly, Al, can we truly be expected to follow any other path? Why has the burden of "purist" been placed solely upon the golf Course Superintendents' shoulder?

Extensive maintenance is not the problem, it is merely the result of "Decisions on the Rules of Golf by the U.S.G.A.," the actual rules themselves and the demand for equitable consistency. As we cannot expect the "dead turf" to survive under the same conditions, we cannot expect maintenance of golf courses to change unless the rules themselves change drastically. As long as the United States Golf Association is committed to the equitable, consistent playing surfaces over 100% of the golf course, then I, as a Professional Golf Course Superintendent, will devote all my efforts to conform to this United States Golf Association policy. You cannot have survival of the fittest, resulting in uneven growth and patches of live and dead turf as well as consistency at the same time.

What, then, is the alternative? I believe the challenge is now before us. We must breed, and support the breeding of finer textured drought resistant, and above all, consistent turfgrass varieties that can survive under all soil conditions and differences in nature. The U.S.G.A. Green Section and every Golf Course Superintendent across the United States must find a way to please all. Until this has been realized, there is truly no hope of "returning to the good old days."

Al, I don't mean to come across as criticizing the United States Golf Association. Golf has made many changes in all aspects of the game. Equipment has become much more sophisticated, to the extent of now being designed by a computer! Golf courses architecture has also made numerous changes from the early "penal" design concept to the "strategic" concept with "heroic" and "redan" principals employed. The result of these changes has been to tilt the balance between strategy, psychology, skill and luck. Within the structure of these changes has also seen golf course maintenance progress towards the consistency dictated by the alternations in equipment, architecture, and the interpretations of the rules by the United States Golf Association.

So please, when this discussion arises again, don't allow the finger to be immediately pointed at my profession of Golf Course Superintendent. Ultimately, the finger must be directed towards those truly responsible for creating this "monster" . . . The United

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States Golf Association itself. Actually, the issue should have died immediately, when the very first ruling was made contrary to: "Play the course as you find it, and play the ball as it lies." The first lenient decision dictated the policy of the future of golf course maintenance and any other conclusion is unfair to the most devoted individual in golf . . . THE GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENT.

Sincerely,

James A. Bertoni

LaJolla Country Club, LaJolla, CA

Membership Application

The following person has applied for membership in M.A.A.G.C.S.:

John C. Sleeman Class D

Assistant Superintendent 5/74 to present

Redgate Golf Course, Rockville, Md.

Application signed by Ray Evans and Gerry Gerard.

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Smooth his path: Request employees who work with your assistant to cooperate with him. Inform everyone of the duties he will be performing--then impress upon him the importance of earning the respect and confidence of these employees.

Share knowledge: You must keep the assistant informed of your plans, your progress and your reasons for making each move. If you expect him to do a good job,

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