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THE GREAT DEBATE

Far be it for me to cloud the issue of USGA Green Section Specifications for a method of putting green construction by stating the facts, but one must start somewhere.

The 'Great Debate' taking place in Greenkeeper International is certainly the best place for such discussion, but the poor old greenkeepers and their bosses must come to a decision eventually regarding what is best for them. All I can do is help shorten the odds against failure and future high maintenance costs. Where else to get these facts than from the horse's mouth and my money is on Jim Snow, National Director of the USGA Green Section, which is responsible for these specifications. Jim has been quoted recently as saying 'while there is nothing foolproof in this world, USGA greens are by far the safest bet. For all the criticism, no-one has come forward with a scientifically based, time tested method that is better, or comparable'. (The full text of Jim Snow's article is printed below).

My message to readers of Greenkeeper International is this: if you want USGA greens, stay away from anything that smacks of "modification", otherwise take your chances, but don't call them USGA greens.

Since there is no other standard for greens construction, (Jim Arthur has come closest with articles on the subject) I

hate to contemplate what other nomenclature may arbitrarily come from golf course architects, course builders, committees, greenkeepers and others willing to compromise and risk long term successful results. Fortunately, the Joint Golf Course Committee for 'The Way Forward' is setting up a Technical Panel which will be strong enough to state which way is forward in this great debate.

USGA specifications were developed in 1960 after years of scientific study and have been under constant review, bearing in mind new data being discovered due to the huge amount of time and money the USGA is investing in turfgrass research. There should be a packed house at Harrogate when BIGGA hold their January Educational Conference, for I understand that Dr Norman Hummel from Cornell University and Stanley Zontek of the USGA Green Section will present papers. Of all the previous lecturers from abroad who have come to sell their ideas, this will be a refreshingly rare treat from the most authoritative of foreign sources. In fact, Dr Hummel is taking a sabbatical from his university to work for the USGA in creating the next revision of the USGA Method of Putting Green Construction.

So, if my words have failed to make an impression, I encourage you and all other interested parties to attend the Harrogate Conference when BIGGA will give you the chance to hear it for yourself.

● The author, Eric Shiel, is the Executive Director of the Joint Golf Course Committee.

Chasing a 'fast food' version of the USGA spec green

by JAMES T SNOW
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It's come to this: After listening to golf course architects, builders, superintendents, and others complain endlessly about USGA specifications for green construction and watching them modify the specs a hundred different ways to meet their own desires, I've decided that what these people must really want is a 'fast food' version of the specs!

What constitutes my definition of 'fast food' specs, you ask? It's simple. Green construction according to the 'fast food' method must be all of the following: It must be **easy, fast, cheap** and **foolproof**.

Unfortunately, building greens is not like flipping burgers. If you look around long enough and set your standards low enough it's possible to find restaurants that serve food that meets all four performance characteristics. If anyone tells you he can build greens that meet all four standards, though, my advice would be look elsewhere.

It's not hard to find greens built with the first three characteristics in mind – **easy, fast** and **cheap**. They're the ones that often fail and must be rebuilt, or else cost many times their original expense in terms of extra maintenance costs, poor quality turf, aggravation and unhappy golfers.

The fourth characteristic – **foolproof** – is the standard the smart money goes with. It means building a green according to the method most likely to succeed, ensuring good drainage, resistance to compaction, consistently good turf conditions and, with maintenance, decades of good performance. It means a method of construction based upon good scientific principles and years of proven field experience; in other words, the USGA method of green construction.

Why wouldn't everyone build **foolproof** greens? Some critics say that USGA greens are too difficult, time-consuming and costly to build. But are these criticisms justified? Let's take a look:

Easy – USGA greens are fully described in a 24-page booklet. Laboratory personnel and Green Section agronomists are available to answer questions and provide other assistance. Sure, it takes some planning and co-ordination to build

USGA greens and it takes more steps than the alternative fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants method. But which method is actually easier? With USGA greens all you have to do is follow the directions. One point in favour of the USGA specs.

Fast – It's true, building a USGA green is not the same as deciding to get in your bulldozer, pushing up some "native soil", planting some grass seed and calling it a green. It requires seeking out the best materials, allowing time for laboratory testing, mixing the components carefully and following through with all the details to ensure success. One point in favour of the critics, but nothing that some planning couldn't change.

Cheap – Okay, the best materials sometimes cost more and it could cost a few hundred more for lab. testing and a few thousand more for the time to put down the intermediate course sand layer. And let's go first class and hire a quality-control person on a costly green construction project. The extra cost for doing it the right way to ensure long-term success is usually less than 10% of the total. Another point in favour of the specs.

Foolproof – Admittedly, there is little that is foolproof in the world, but USGA greens are by far the safest bet when it comes to green construction. For all of the criticism, no-one has come forward with a scientifically based, time tested method that's better, or even cheaper.

During the past year we've heard from every imaginable corner of the game about how the USGA ought to change its specs to make them easier, faster and cheaper. Not surprisingly, most recommendations best served an individual's needs, rather than the needs of golf courses for top-quality greens. Rest assured, however, that the USGA is not going to put its name on construction methods designed primarily to make green construction easy, fast and cheap – without including the foolproof. If we ever endorse 'fast food' green construction techniques, it will only be after extensive scientific investigation and extensive field testing – and after the fat and cholesterol have been removed too!

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