

## THE NEED FOR SPEED

**H**as your club ever suffered from post-Augusta syndrome? Sometime within a few weeks of the great event you arrive at work, bleary-eyed, at six o'clock on a Sunday morning to do your duty and cut for the day's competition. Arriving at the sheds you find a note pinned to the door which reads: 'Greens are too slow. Lower cut. Green Chairman.'

Knowing that you will shortly have a horde of members champing at the bit, ready to fill the course with some terrible golf and cheerful expletives, the last thing anyone would want is to have to start ripping units from machines and messing around with height bars. It is little wonder then, that in the post-Augusta days, greenkeepers have been known to roundly curse televised golf in general and Americans in particular.

One might ask at this time if the rest of the US suffers from the same backlash, or is the need for speed a driving force in American golf? Following the words of Dr Robert Brame (USGA Green Section) delivered at this year's BIGGA Education Conference, the latter would seem to be true. Not only do our American colleagues accept this, they boast to each other about speeds achieved and will go to extremes to effect improvement. For instance, cutting at one eighth of an inch has become widespread. In an effort to dissuade courses from doing this, agronomists have endorsed the use of powered ride-on rollers, recently introduced, to produce good speeds with a raised cutting height. The findings have been, however, that course superintendents are using the rollers and still cutting at one eighth to produce ever-faster surfaces. Further, grass species for greens are being selected purely for their ability to produce fast surfaces. As a result, Dr. Brame tells us that the fine courses at Pebble Beach and Pine Valley are growing stands of pure *Poa annua* because it gives the best results.

Returning to the UK, it would be fair to say that most club golf is not played under these constraints. I wonder however, how many agronomists in this country are fed up with being called to judge (to borrow a biblical expression) 'the quick and the dead'? The agronomist's consensus on cutting height for greens would seem to be as follows: a quarter of an inch is desirable; three sixteenths if you must; any less – a sharp intake of breath and 'don't tell anyone I advised it'!

It is understandable that when a sensi-

ble programme of aeration, nutrition, watering etc, has been recommended, to find greens that are nearly white through close mowing and scalped down to the soil on the smallest undulations, any agronomist may begin to despair.

Nevertheless, the stimpmeter is with us. The simple inclined-plane device that at the correct elevation causes a ball to roll more than eleven feet across a green at Augusta may now have become the short yardstick for us all. Many older greenkeepers consider the implement is only fit for testing marbles – if the user has any! Perhaps, however, the owner of a Mini may be forgiven for wanting to drive a Porsche, and the golfer likewise.

So where does this leave the greenkeeper? Opinion seems to vary on what is the balance point on cutting height to give optimum speeds and maintain a healthy sward. Some would hold that they can cut at three sixteenths all year round with no adverse effects. Others cut closer for major competitions only and allow the greens to recover afterwards. Cutting aside, it is becoming increasingly common to use other management techniques to adjust green speeds, these being multi-cutting, grooming, rolling and irrigation control.



by **TONY HOWARTH**

To offer a brief comment on each – cutting greens twice or more in different directions can increase speeds, but this follows the law of diminishing returns. Grooming aims to give speed by thinning the sward. Rolling, with the turf-iron type ride-on machine, is claimed by manufacturers to increase green speed considerably. All of the above may be helpful in achieving faster green speeds without closer mowing. I wonder, however, what the compound effects will be in terms of compaction? Even grooming means units with extra weight running over the greens.

At one time cricket wickets and golf greens were diametrically opposed in the turf management spectrum. Will we next see the introduction of the sarel roller to golf green maintenance to enable water

to penetrate the surface? Returning to the last alternative – irrigation control – this method may, if miscalculated, prove the most costly. To use the cricket analogy again, it is a requirement that a wicket is allowed to dry out in preparation for a match to inject pace. The same approach may be employed with a golf green. But at what cost? The green could become unreceptive to the approach shot and leave the golfer with an unfair challenge irrespective of his putting ability. The worst scenario could also include loss of sward due to drought stress.

All techniques designed to increase green speed may have their pitfalls, but if Curtly Ambrose turns up at your eighteenth green one day and expresses a desire to bowl on it, I think it's a fair bet that there is something wrong.

I think it is important also to look at green speed from the point of view of the golfer. If most of us could ride a docile old nag, not many would fancy his chances with a racehorse. So, it is not surprising on the day after the big competition to find the club regular standing slack-jawed on the first green as his putt snakes two feet left of the pin and ends up six feet past. His game is not set up for this level of green speed, and I would ask, is anyone's?

Augusta is a marvellous spectacle set out to test the best in the world. But when we see top golfers using cross-handed grips and chin-high putters, ostensibly to control the putting 'yips', are we doing the right thing? When a stroke becomes a nudge and a good reading becomes a good guess, I wonder.

■ As an interesting aside, the committee at Augusta National posted the cutting regimes undertaken during this year's Masters as follows: "Our fairways are now being mowed at 7/16", the tees at 3/8", the greens at 1/8", and these levels are to be maintained until the conclusion of the tournament. All mowing schedules are, of course, subject to weather conditions." Augusta's greens are Pennncross bentgrass, tees and tees Bermudagrass. The course is closed for play between May and October. – Editor.

**What do you think? Do you feel the need for speed? Do you have any good techniques? Letters to The Editor, Greenkeeper International, 13 Firlie Close, Seaford, East Sussex BN25 2HL.**