

Taking the rough with the smooth

Eavesdrop on conversation in any clubhouse and the subject matter, especially after a round has been played, is likely to focus on the forever controversial question of green speed. Those whose putts have found the target consistently will shout the loud hurrah; "Our greenkeeper has the equation just about right," they'll say, while the also-rans will vehemently debate—with anyone prepared to listen—the misery of life in Tortoiseville. Next time out, with the tables turned by golf's perverse nature, those same glory boys will be baying for blood. It's a topic which every greenkeeper believes is way past its sell-by date.

It's true, green speed as locker room fodder seems done to death, yet there is sound argument for turning the tables 180°, counter-attacking with the contention that it is the perception of green speed which is beating the golfer at his own game.

How come? Ask a few simple questions, like how are they measuring this so-called speed, how do they judge slow from medium...and what exactly is fast? Does the average golfer really know? Touch and feel are the senses by which a player purports to measure your greens, yet the simple, clinical fact is that touch and feel cannot be measured, it's different for everyone, no two ever are alike.

By the same standards, and this is a point green committee men especially might take on board, no two golf courses—or two greens, for that matter—are ever alike. The variables are too numerous to list but include variant grass species, changeable climate

conditions (dew-soaked morning greens, quickened naturally by Mother Nature as the day progresses), contours, green sizes, shelter from trees versus raw exposure to wind, outbreaks of disease, the list is endless.

It is the so-called elite golfers (handicap zero to five, shall we say), who are the most vocal. For them especially the game has changed; for their demands have wiped away the old philosophy of 'playing the ball where it lies' to one of insistence that greens be set up so that they may lob the ball into a perfect, playable position every time. Yet golf is meant to be a game of strategy and positioning—above the hole with downhill slope should be three-putt country, for the point of positioning has been missed. As golf writer Jim Achenbach opined most recently, "anyone who ends up in the wrong position on the green should be putter-whipped."

What can be measured, in terms of the number of days before turf stress sets in, is the direct correlation between giving golfers what they interpret as fast (shaven) greens and compromising the continuing good health of your sward. Your members will not thank you for failing, while providing shaven surfaces on a continuous basis will very likely give you an odds-on chance to line up at the employment office.

So, how will you keep the putting pundits satisfied? The answer, because golfers confuse fast greens with consistent roll, is to be found in one simple word—SMOOTH!

Because the cutting of greens is per-

haps the most routine of all jobs, it is easy for the operator to slip into auto-pilot, overlooking the simple things that produce perfect results. The objective must be to achieve a perfect, smooth, stress free cut, clean straight lines, every time, without scalping high spots or leaving hollows with uncut, lush patches. This is easy enough on greens which are relatively flat or gently undulating, but where severe contouring is found, particularly on the cusp of a two-tier green, the problem calls for extra care.

Extra care means checking your mower regularly, ensuring blades are set accurately to the desired height and that they are very, very sharp! With rare exceptions, there is little need for the height of cut to drop below three sixteenths of an inch, which is stressful enough, considering the rigours of daily play, indeed quarter of an inch is often acceptable for routine play if all other smoothness regimes are carried through. Such regimes must permit the ball to be stroked rather than clouted, thus rolling more easily across surfaces where friction has been reduced to a minimum.

These include reducing thatch build-up; verticutting as often as good sense dictates with the blades set 'softly' so the unit just nicks the sward, lightly dressing the turf, regularly and carefully, ensuring all the topdressing is drag matted or brushed into the surface, followed a few days later with a pass using turf groomers—lightly again. All of these will contribute toward the target of uniformity. It must be stressed, however, as no two greens are alike, greens at variance with each other will not necessarily need an equal amount of mechanical grooming.

In this sometimes ridiculous race for pace, the greenkeeper may take comfort in knowing that turf machinery manufacturers are clearly supportive, indeed far more concerned for continuous turf health than are your members for speedy greens.

Knowing that many greenkeepers prefer walking, the array of walk-behind greens mowers—Super Certes and the 11-blade reel Ransomes Greens Super are confirmed favourites—is sufficient to please the most fastidious, offering a choice of tournament bedknives, brushes, vertical cutters, two-inch guide wheels, roller scrapers, indeed nothing is too much trouble in this customer-led situation.

What is also clear is that many more turf managers are ringing the changes, using ride-on's during weekdays and walk-behind mowers at weekends. Of course, mowing with a ride-on is altogether different, with greenkeeper and machine effectively moulded into a single unit. A riding triplex is faster than a walker, so operators should be especially alert for any grease or oil spillage, be prepared to stop immediately, shut off the machine and to clear up before too much damage has been caused. For this reason alone, though clearly there are many other benefits, both mechanical and environmental, (for the parts it doesn't have, or need, for instance), the battery powered electric triplex mower is winning converts galore.

Finally, a word about Stimp-meters. Master Greenkeeper Terry Buchen is a believer in the tool's value for measuring consistency and 'truth'. Roll three identical balls, each bearing the same brand and compression ratio, from the same angle, he says, and if the surface is free from deforming characteristics those balls will gently touch one another—in both directions. Buchen has expressed surprise at the pride some UK greenkeepers exhibit in having greens which, by their inconsistency, test 'local knowledge'.

Then there's the lovely true story concerning Shaig Logan, for many years before his demise the Head Greenkeeper at Muirfield. Shaig was presented with a Stimpmeter prior to The Open being staged at his course. "What's this for?", he asked. It's for measuring the speed of the greens, he was told. "Why would I want to do that?" So that you can make each green roll at the same speed. "Why would I want to do that?" So the 1st green would not be slower than the 9th, that the 10th be equal to the 17th and 18th; not slower, not faster. "But, laddie," he said, "that's why we have practice rounds."



The extra care taken when greens are cut by pedestrian mower is vividly portrayed here at the world-famous Pebble Beach course.