

The movement to convert golf courses to non-metal spike environments is gathering speed rapidly in Europe. Bill McGuinness keeps track of the progress...

Puncture repair

As often happens with a contentious issue involving a commercially-motivated element, the pros and cons of the opposing positions have been debated vigorously during the last two to three years, but the growing number of European golf courses converting to non-metal environments appears to be heading for the "critical mass" that will accelerate into an accepted industry trend.

The non-metal movement has a number of well-publicised positive benefits relating to the health and general well-being of golf courses, but two negative aspects have until now slowed the pace of acceptance here in

Europe - the traction and the durability of the plastic spikes normally chosen to replace metal, with particular emphasis on the traction performance in wet European course conditions.

The traction issue is often framed in terms of the legal liability the golf club might face should it ban metal spikes. A third, often unspoken opposing position, is more one of principle - the idea of being told what you cannot wear on your feet if you are to play at the golf club you've finally been allowed to join after five years on the waiting list.

Listening to the debate only three years ago, when virtually no courses in Europe had banned metal spikes, a bet against the movement's success in Europe would have seemed a safe one. "Fine for the U.S., but for one thing our grasses are different and for another, plastic cleats don't work in wet conditions."

But such a "safe bet" would ignore the weight of the benefits which await courses which do take the decision to create a non-metal environment. Whatever your position on the issue, the facts are that without metal spikes the greens are much smoother all day, there is less grass plant damage, and

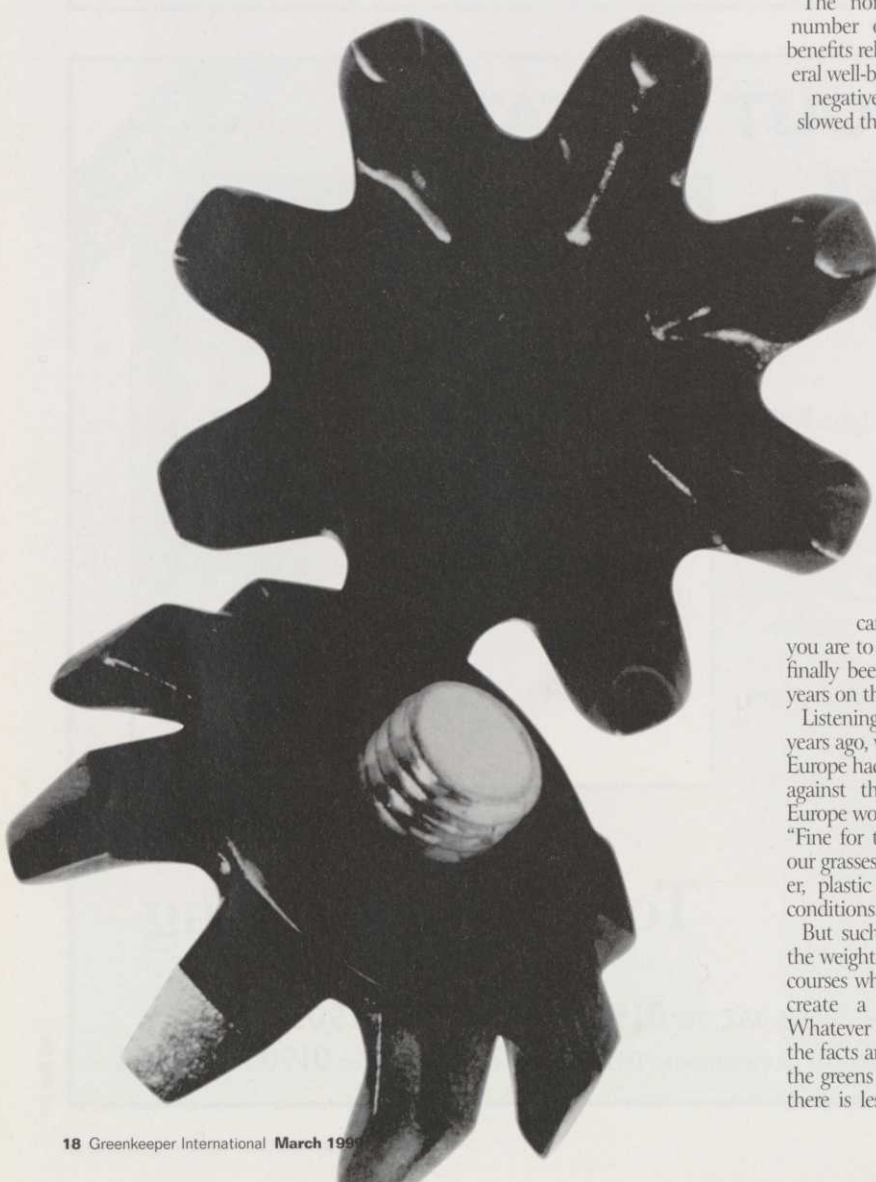
less damage to clubhouse, bridges, and walkways - all commercial issues difficult to ignore totally.

The 'safe bet' would also ignore the determination and product development inventiveness of companies like pioneer Softspikes, Inc., which started the whole U.S. movement in 1994 and obviously has a vested interest in the movement taking hold in Europe as it has in the U.S., where metal spikes are now heading for extinction. (FootJoy no longer produces any golf shoes factory-fitted with metal spikes for the U.S. market.)

Going back to the movement's inception in 1994, the original plastic "cleats" (as they are known in the U.S.) were shaped like frosting swirls, and were designed by an inventor in the U.S. state of Idaho to enable golfers to obtain traction on the often icy surfaces prevailing in this inhospitable winter climate. But in normal golfing weather, on grass, they gave only about 75% of the traction of the standard 6mm metal spikes. However, the fact that they substantially improve putting surfaces and noticeably reduce other types of course and clubhouse damage were sufficient factors to enable them to gain a foothold despite their traction shortcomings. And as luck or fate would have it, it was an unexpected and untouted benefit which kept the movement alive during its beginnings - golfer comfort.

Golfers found that the tired feet, aches and pains which they often experienced after 18 holes were either eliminated or substantially reduced by wearing plastic cleats. Quite simply, golfers that otherwise would have been unwilling to put up with some traction loss from the early plastic spike designs were willing to trade it off for the comfort gains, with the added bonus of getting smoother greens in the bargain.

Seeing the potential for large volumes of plastic spike sales, a number of companies jumped into the market to join Softspikes, and sparked a wave of product development innovations which still hasn't peaked. In early 1998, Softspikes finally cracked the 'better traction than metal' barrier and introduced a spike which was independently shown to have 14% better



traction than the standard 6mm metal spike, even in wet conditions. Admittedly, it was traction-tested on the Bermuda grass relevant to much of the U.S. market, but it was a vast improvement over the then-existing plastic spikes, and created a surge of product acceptance and course conversions.

But in the highly litigious U.S. market, the question of a club's legal liability became a more hotly debated issue than the traction itself. What legal exposure would be incurred by a club banning metal spikes? With opinion initially divided, it became a question of letting the legal issues take their natural course as events unfolded; large numbers of courses evaluated the risks and decided to ban metal spikes. The U.S. course experience speaks for itself. Over 7,500 (almost half of all U.S. courses) have now implemented non-metal policies, and not a single one has reverted back. There have in fact been lawsuits regarding injuries, but not one has been decided in favour of the complainant. In virtually all cases, it has been a situation of golfer carelessness, and in general the same injury would have occurred were the golfer wearing standard metal spikes, or no spikes.

But what these events have done is to make course managements more aware of course conditions about which golfers should be either safeguarded or warned - regardless of whether they are wearing metal spikes, plastic spikes or street shoes. As a point of reference, there are still far more U.S. lawsuits relating to golf balls hitting players, food poisoning, car park injuries, and injuries from course equipment than there are spike related litigations. In short, the question of a club's liability on the non-metal issue has quickly and quietly become simply one more legal/administrative issue which a club has to deal with in the course of normal business.

A point often missed in the legal debate is the fact that a club banning metal spikes is not telling the golfer what he must do (ie wear plastic spikes), but rather what he must not do. He can wear plastic cleats, or trainers, or street shoes, or emulate Sam Snead and play barefoot. But he must not wear metal spikes. (And he must not wear a shirt without a collar, or shorts which are too short, or appear in casual dress in the dining room after 7pm.)

Commercially-minded clubs were also very concerned about "being the first" to ban metal spikes. The perception was that golfers would stay away in droves and green fee revenue would decrease. Here again, the opposite proved true in the U.S. where courses turned the tables and began to actively and successfully promote the improved course conditions. Quite quickly, the issue became moot. Here in Europe, the same trend is developing. "The Business Golfer," a U.K. publication catering to the 15,000 organisers of corporate and society golf days, recently reported that metal-free courses are now becoming favoured venues for events because of the improved course conditions.

Another unexpected and pleasant surprise awaited courses fearing rev-

enue decreases. Clubs found that their bar revenue was increasing. With no need to visit the locker room or car park to change their spikes before entering the spikeless bar (and therefore less time to feel guilty that household projects needed doing), more players headed directly into the bar from the 18th green.

This year has the makings of a watershed for the metal-free movement in Europe, with some prestigious names now getting behind it. While not imposing an outright ban on metal spikes, the St Andrews Links Trust is now actively encouraging all players to shed their metal spikes before playing any of its six courses, and The Belfry has implemented an identical policy for its three courses. Both organisations are fundamentally in favour of an outright metal ban, but were reluctant to take the step without a phasing-in period. Both anticipate converting to firm non-metal policies in 2000.

Adding to the metal-free impetus will certainly be the latest development in plastic spikes from Softspikes (pictured). Called the "Black Widow," it incorporates cantilevered "legs" rather than the rigid points or rings which characterise most of today's plastic spikes. As the golfer walks, the eight legs actually move slightly outward, getting their traction from a sideways "bite" on the surface grass. According to Softspikes European Manager Bill McGuinness, "This pretty much eliminates any indentations or depression-producing action completely. And the traction is much greater than anything we've produced to-date, and is far better than metal spikes."

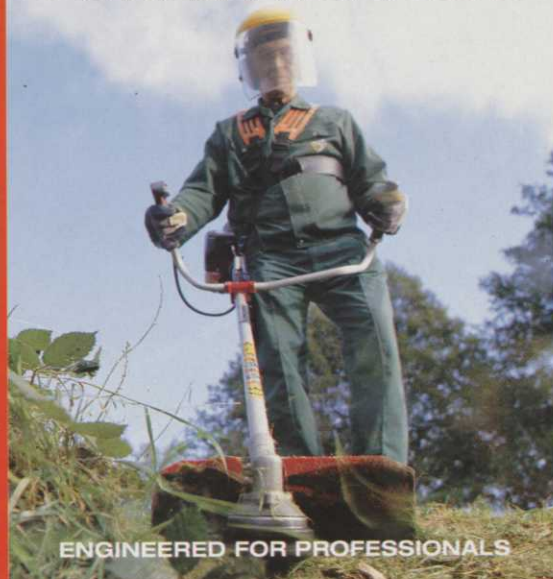
He added, "I recently gave a prototype set to one of the leading U.K. European Tour pros to test. He called me last week from Dubai just to tell me he'd tried them at Chart Hills in the pouring rain before heading for the Dubai tour event, and they were 'awesome,' adding 'You could climb trees with these things!' I don't know about the tree-climbing, but we did try to establish a 'new level' of cleat performance with the Black Widow, and I think we've accomplished it. And we've already had six Tour wins with it in the U.S. while it was still in prototype."

Whatever the outcome of any tree-climbing efforts, 1999 looks to be one of major growth in the movement. As McGuinness says, "It's largely committees which decide whether to ban metal spikes, and it can be a vocal issue. But when committee members see the likes of St Andrews Links and The Belfry joining the ranks, with probably another 200 mostly prestigious courses converting this year in the U.K. alone, the many arguments in favour of non-metal policies are going to start carrying far more weight than they have to-date."



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