

# Putting the Record Straight

The majority of golf clubs and courses never get the opportunity to host a European Tour Tournament and, as such, there are a number of misnomers about the Tour and course conditioning, the set-up of the golf course and its 'agronomy/greenkeeping' support staff. I hope to clear up some of these.

*Continue  
to learn*



▲ Aerial view of the 18th at Wentworth during the Volvo PGA Championship

One of the strengths of the Tour is that it plays on a variety of different types of courses – links, heathland, parkland and many new, modern creations. Each is treated uniquely, as every one has different grasses and a different climate, so the 'set-up' of the courses is different.

Our aim is for the golf course to provide a tough, fair challenge for our members, who are some of the best players in the world. To assist the club in achieving this, we do have 'course preparation guidelines' and we do have an 'agronomy/greenkeeping' support team who work with the resident course staff.

Before discussing our guidelines further, I would firstly like to state that our 'agronomy' department (Richard Stillwell, Jack McMillan, Graeme MacNiven, Dirk Thelen with Eddie Adams, joining the Tour from The Old Course shortly) is there to assist the Course Manager and staff.

Our personnel do not take over the running of the course.

We advise and support as much as we physically can to ensure the best playing surfaces we possibly can. This might mean our staff being on-site for a couple of weeks (though we have had instances where staff have been on-site for 10 weeks).

Through our contract with Toro – the official supplier to the Tour – we are able to support the venue with additional machinery. While via our association with Bernhard we can send in a mechanic and grinding technician to ensure all machines are cutting perfectly and at the exact heights.

**PUTTING GREENS** get the greatest scrutiny and criticism of any area of the course (just like at your own course). In our guidelines we have three main criteria. In order of priority they are:

1. Smoothness of putting surface which will allow a ball to run straight and true without 'snaking' or 'bobbling' and remain in contact with the surface at all times.

2. A good green will be firm (not hard) and will accept a well-struck iron shot and will reject a poorly struck approach shot or a shot from the rough.

3. Pace of the greens should be as fast as possible provided that the surface smoothness is never sacrificed in order to produce speed. Obviously each venue will vary in pace depending on putting green construction, grass type, machinery available and climatic conditions. But speeds between 9' 6" and 11' are desirable.

As you see, we are not ruled by the stimpmeter! Yes, we do have venues where the greens run faster than 11' but only if the quality of the surface can take it. Our guidelines highlight top dressing, aeration, verticutting and water control to achieve the desired quality.

Regular light dressings of dry, fine sand, well matted in, will assist in giving a smooth surface for the ball to run on. The increase in number of cuts of the tournament green will also help the roll of the ball on the greens. In some circumstances the use of rollers (such as a Turf Iron) can aid the levelling of the putting surface but care should be taken not to negate the pre-tournament aeration by over-rolling.

Firm and fast greens provide the best test for both approach shots and putts. A sound programme of using as little water as necessary can help produce championship greens and a well-struck medium iron from the fairway should be able to grip and hold. (The desired effect lies in a layer of thatch or fibre not thicker than 10mm.)

The great tendency is for clubs to over-fertilise and over-water too near to the event which apart from creating growth, promotes the build-up of thatch. Green (colour) is not always best. Apart from not rewarding the skilful well-struck shot, soft greens tend to footprint and mark.

Ideally the green conditions and speed at the beginning of the tournament week should be nearly identical on the final day.

We do not stipulate a cutting height for greens, as much care needs to be taken to ensure they are not put under much stress by too much cutting at low heights, particularly when tournaments are played at sensitive times – ie, spring, autumn or periods of excessive heat. The frequency of cut during an event can vary greatly, from double cutting to six times between rounds. Again the programme is agreed between the Course Manager and the Tour, normally the Tournament Director, and will change daily if required. Hand mowing or cutting by triplex are both acceptable to the Tour.

We do ask that the direction of cut is changed for every cut to help reduce nap or grain.

Naturally any treatment that the greens undergo should also be applied exactly in the same way to the practice putting green.

For the most part, **COLLARS AND APRONS** should be treated as the greens. It is useful to have the cutting heights the same as the tees (ie, 8-9mm) as generally the same mower is used to cut both. It is important, however, that the apron is cut in a diamond pattern and that the collar is cut in reverse direction each day to prevent the build up of nap. (Players have

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▲ Wentworth's 1st



▲ A well prepared practice area

commented in the past that the collars have been cut only in one direction and that this then may favour a player who draws or slices the ball!)

The collar width guideline is 1.2m (1.3 yds) and that this should be maintained at this width around the entire outline of the green.

In the weeks prior to the tournament, and even during the practice rounds, the championship **TEES**, especially Par 3 tees, should be rested.

Tees should be level, firm and maintained at a height of 6-8mm. It is very easy for championship tees to become soft through lack of play and lack of aeration. This must be monitored.

In the event of strong winds, or purely to give variety, the Tournament Director may request that a couple of teeing grounds on a particular hole are prepared ready for play.

Tees should be cut in a diamond pattern as a tee cut directly towards a fairway can be misleading to the players, especially if the teeing ground is set at an angle to the line of play.

**FAIRWAYS** should be between 22-32 metres in width depending on the difficulty of the hole. If a course is being used for the first time, the Tournament Director may narrow or reshape the fairways in line with the distances the professionals hit the ball.

The fairways should be cut at a height of 8-12mm. Fluffiness in fairway turf is undesirable and the tendency should be towards firm, tight turf. Mowing heights for tournament play should be established one to two weeks in advance, as last minute reductions in mowing heights create excessive loose grass cuttings on the fairways and could cause 'yellowing' and scalping.

But wherever possible boxes or grass collectors should be used. Small hollows should be hand-cut if fairway mowers cannot produce a uniform surface and all loose grass should be removed. Small hollows should be levelled, if possible, prior to the tournament.

Wherever possible, all fairways should be cut in the morning prior to play, boxing the clippings off. Where it is not possible to obtain boxes, it may be necessary to cut some or all fairways after play and in this instance we would require fairways to be swept before play (normally by dragging a hosepipe) to remove dew.

Ideally all fairways should be cut in a diamond pattern, with regular reverse cutting to prevent nap.

The long stripe cutting pattern or half light and half dark pattern favoured by links courses are acceptable, though players do feel their ball gets a better forward bounce when the grass has been cut with the direction of play.

Whatever mowing pattern is chosen, reverse cutting is vital to stop nap, as on thatchy, soft fairways nap does affect the striking of the ball.

The Tour does and will implement the preferred lies rule if it feels it is necessary. In the majority of cases, it is only introduced if the ball is 'picking up' mud, as the flight of the ball is adversely affected when struck.

A complete programme of divoting should be carried out at least four weeks prior to the tournament.

Around the fairways there should be a strip of semi-rough 3-4 metres wide, which should be cut at a height between 25-35mm. All semi-rough should be cut in the same direction.

The height of **ROUGH** will vary depending upon whether or not it is maintained, and the type of grass. Normally maintained rough is 100mm (4").

If any new sand is required for the **BUNKERS**, it should be applied at least two months in advance of the tournament so it can become well settled.

We prefer that bunkers are maintained by hand and are raked in the direction of play.

Two areas that are vital to the success of a tournament but are sometimes overlooked are:

**THE PRACTICE AREA.** This is where the modern professional spends hours and hours. Therefore the teeing area should be prepared in the same way as those areas on the course and is required to be a minimum of 10m deep to accommodate seven days of practice.

**RAIN PREPARATION.** Many believe the Tour follows the sun but I can assure you the Tour ends droughts when it arrives in town! The course must be prepared for the worst.

In concluding, I must stress our aim is to have the best quality playing surfaces possible week in week out, venue to venue, and this can be achieved only by working very closely and in tandem with all the host venues' staff.

A well-presented course in first-class condition benefits all parties involved in the Tournament.