

# What do your members want?

*(Aligning golf course performance with the requirements of the golf club members)*

Andy Owen and Katie Walls, from Myerscough College, recently completed a study which attempted to provide an answer to this question to try and inform maintenance and management practices which are currently in place. The results are summarised here





**The debate centred around the height of cut held during Harrogate Week 2010 generated a good deal of discussion, follow-up articles and message-board posts across the industry.**

One comment stood out, 'fast greens are what my members want'. This suggests that many in the industry strive to achieve a fast surface to keep their membership satisfied.

There can be very little argument, particularly in the current financial climate that to ensure economic sustainability it is imperative for a golf club to provide a golfer with what he or she wants, particularly in terms of the playing quality of the fine turf surfaces on the golf course.

However, a number of questions do remain. Do all the members at a golf club have the same perfor-

mance requirements of the golf greens? How important is speed? And are smoothness, firmness or consistency just as important, or maybe more important than speed?

**Methodology**

The study was carried out at a good quality parkland golf course in the NW England.

During a single week it was attempted to get every golfer who played a round of golf to complete a questionnaire which asked a range of baseline questions, investigated the importance of playing quality (speed, smoothness and firmness), and also the importance of 'non-golf' factors.

Two hundred and forty five questionnaires were completed over five days and so the study generated a very valid data set for analysis.

**The respondents**

A greater number of questionnaire responses were received from the 'male' membership category (table one), although a large number of 'visitors' to the golf course also completed questionnaires. These return rates will correspond to the number of rounds played by each category during the testing week. The club had relatively few juniors playing the course in the week the study took place. It was estimated that over 50% of the golfers who played a round of golf during the study completed a questionnaire.

Table one. Membership category response rate, mean and range of handicap

Category	Response rate	Mean handicap	Handicap range
Mens	100	13	1 - 28
Ladies	39	22	5 - 34
Junior	15	17	7 - 24
Senior	24	18	8 - 28
Visitors	67	14	1 - 34

The overall mean handicap of respondents was 15, although golfers with a wide range of handicaps completed questionnaires from every membership category (table

one). The men had the lowest mean handicap and the ladies had the highest.

One of the aims of the study was to assess the importance of green performance measurements to the membership of a golf club. The performance characteristic of golf green speed was rated as important or very important by 73% of respondents to the questionnaire (figure one). As a comparison the performance characteristic of green smoothness was rated as important or very important by 91% of respondents to the questionnaire (figure two). Golfers at this club rated green smoothness as being more important than green speed, however both performance measurements were seen as important by a large number of golfers.

This results can however be investigated further by splitting the data set up into separate membership categories. This allows a clear comparison to be made between all the membership categories and their preferences of green performance. The comparison of figures three, four and five shows that 76% of the male membership category rate speed as being very important or important to their game of golf. This is compared with 59% of the lady membership category and 55% of the senior membership category. There is a distinct difference between the categories and

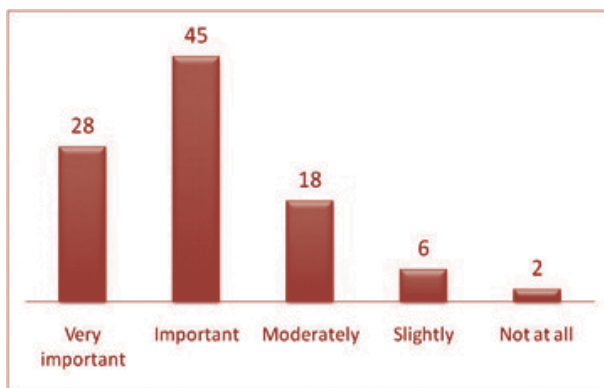


Figure one. Percentage responses to 'please could you rate how important green speed is to your game of golf'

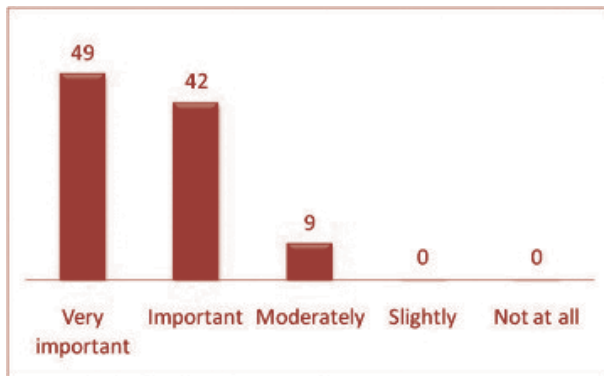


Figure two. Percentage responses to 'please could you rate how important green smoothness is to your game of golf'

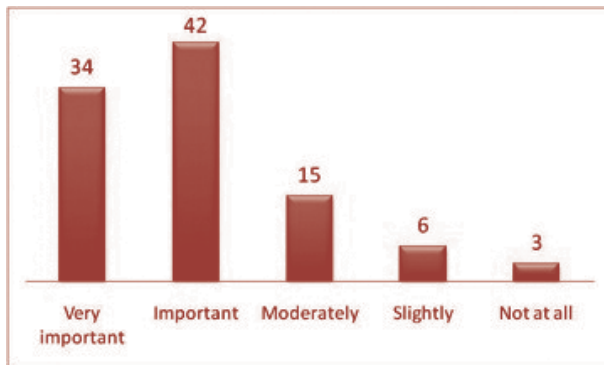


Figure three. Male members' category responses to 'please could you rate how important green speed is to your game of golf'

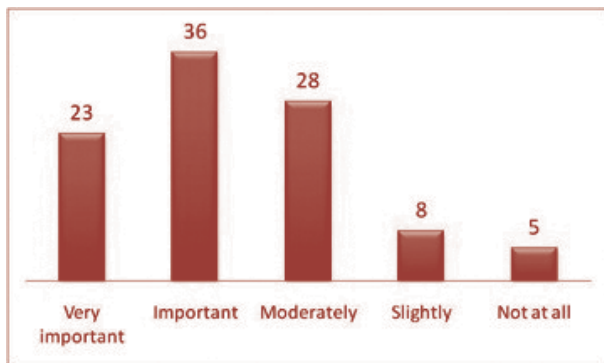


Figure four. Lady members' category responses to 'please could you rate how important green speed is to your game of golf'



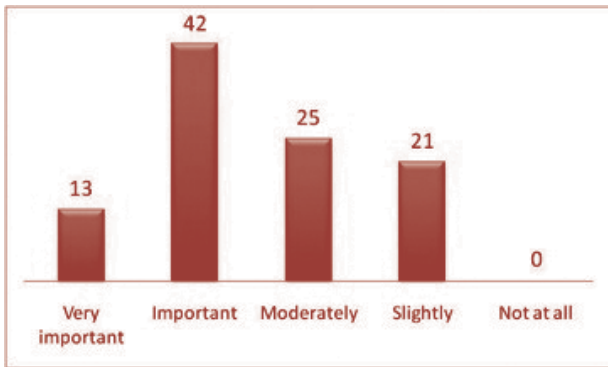


Figure five. Senior members' category responses to 'please could you rate how important green speed is to your game of golf'

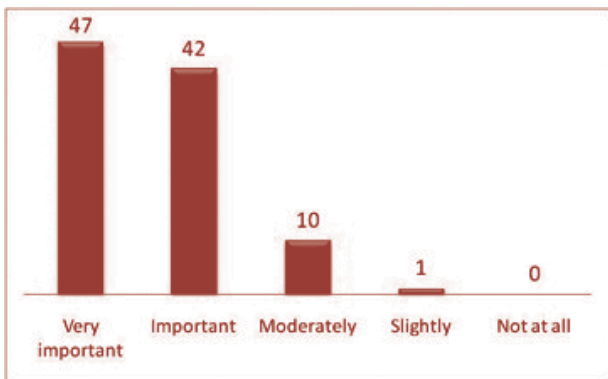


Figure six. Male members category responses to 'please could you rate how important green smoothness is to your game of golf'

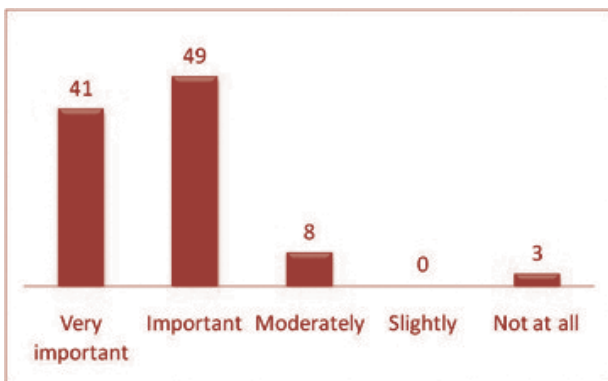


Figure seven. Lady members category responses to 'please could you rate how important green smoothness is to your game of golf'

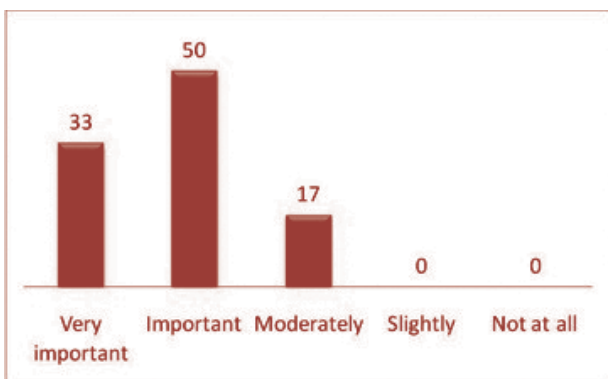


Figure eight. Senior members' category responses to 'please could you rate how important green smoothness is to your game of golf'



how they rate the importance of golf green speed.

It is interesting to make the comparison between green speed and green smoothness within each membership category. The majority of the men's membership category (89%) rate green smoothness as very important or important to their game of golf (figure six). However, both the lady members (90%) and the senior members (83%) also rate smoothness as very important or important (figure seven and eight). Every membership category rates smoothness above speed in terms of the importance to their game of golf, and there is clear contrast between the rating of speed and smoothness.

The second aim of the study was to assess the importance of non-golf related environmental factors alongside green performance characteristics. To achieve this a question asked the participants to circle three factors that could be considered to be central to their enjoyment of the game of golf.

A range of factors were provided: Birdsong, Trees, The view, A good walk, Dry fairways, Pin position, Green speed, Peace and quiet, Birds, Green smoothness, No greens maintenance, The weather, Green firmness, Wildlife, Good company, Speed of play, Wild flowers, Striped playing surfaces No rush and Raked bunkers.

Those related to the players score, and individual golf game; putting, driving, short game etc. were deliberately excluded.

The responses for this question from all respondents shows clearly that 'good company' was the most important factor for the enjoyment of a game of golf (figure nine). This

was followed by the 'weather' and then 'speed of play'. Following these three categories were aspects of playing quality particularly green smoothness and then green speed. These five factors could be highlighted as the most important needed for golfers at this club to enjoy a round of golf.

This data can however be investigated further by splitting the data set up into grouped handicap categories. This allows a comparison to be made between respondents with a range of golf handicaps to assess whether their enjoyment of the game of golf is based on different factors. The handicap categories selected for analysis were handicaps 1-9, handicap 10-19 and handicap 20+. This data was converted to a percentage scale to allow comparison between each data set.

The lowest handicap golfers (1-9) identified green smoothness and good company as the most crucial elements for their enjoyment of golf (figure ten). 'Speed of play', 'green speed' and 'weather' were also identified as important. Other factors such as the 'wildlife', 'wild flowers', 'trees', 'peace and quiet' were considered relatively unimportant.

Responses from the moderate handicap category golfers (10-19) show some differences to the higher handicap golfers. The same five factors are highlighted as being central to their enjoyment of the game of golf but in a different order (figure 11). Green performance characteristics are ranked of lower importance than 'the weather', 'good company' and 'speed of play'. 'Dry fairways', 'no rush' and 'the view' are becoming more important for the moderate handicap golfers.



Responses from the higher handicap category golfers (20+) show similar trends as the playing characteristics of green speed and green smoothness are of even lower importance than 'good company' and the weather (figure 12). For this category of golfer 'no rush' becomes even more important and 'the view' 'a good walk' and wildlife 'dry fairways' and 'peace and quiet' are also highlighted as being as important as green speed and green smoothness.

**Conclusion**

In the current economic climate it is important to consider what all the membership of any golf club want from their playing surfaces. The data collected at this golf course makes an interesting case study comparing green speed and green smoothness. Both characteristics are important qualities of the playing surface and need to be managed carefully. However, the data here suggests that golf course managers should prioritise green smoothness over green speed as this is rated as more important by the men's, ladies' and seniors' membership categories. Green speed should not be ignored as this is rated as important by a large proportion of each category but much more so for the men's membership category than the ladies' and the seniors'. Perhaps there is the potential to focus more effort on achieving green smoothness than chasing that extra 30 cm of green speed.

When the data from the questionnaire relating to what makes a round of golf enjoyable for the members of a golf club (beyond playing well and achieving a low score) is considered in detail some interesting talking points are raised. Primarily five factors feature strongly

for all golfers with a handicap lower than 19. These factors were, good company, weather, speed of play, green smoothness and green speed. The highest scoring factor 'good company' show that golf is a sociable game and having good company is crucial to the enjoyment of a round. The second factor to score well was 'the weather' - and perhaps the wet weather recorded during the week of data collection highlighted this factor more than many others for the players. 'Speed of play' was also highlighted, golfers ideally do not want to get held up during a round. Green performance characteristics; smoothness and speed, did score highly - showing the obvious factor that any golf club wishing to retain members does need to carefully manage and maintain the playing surfaces.

When data for the golfers with higher handicaps (20+) was considered the relative importance of the green performance characteristics dropped noticeably, 'company' and the 'weather' still scored highly but other factors became important to their enjoyment of the game. Noticeably 'no rush' and 'the view' were more important than 'green speed' and 'green smoothness'. These factors were also much more important than factors such as 'striping of fairways', 'pin position' and 'raked bunkers'.

The results to this survey would suggest all golf courses would benefit from a close examination of their members or regular users and to consider their golfing abilities. It is clear that golfers of different abilities look to a range of factors on a golf course to get pleasure from the game. It would be prudent for a golf course to consider these extra non-golf factors in any strategic long-term planning.

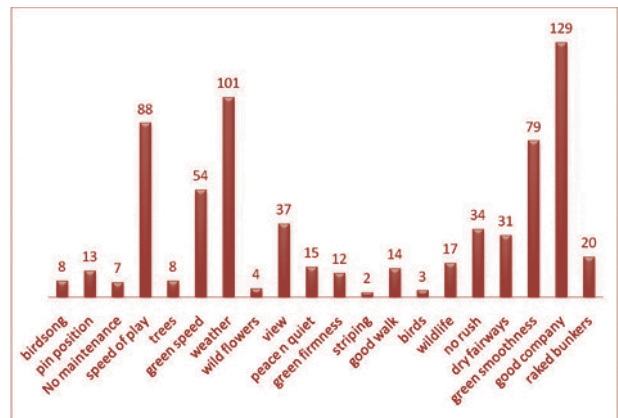


Figure nine. Responses to the question circle THREE of the following golf course characteristics that are central to your enjoyment of a game of golf

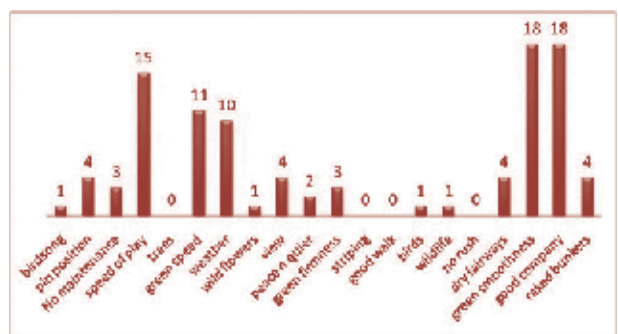


Figure ten. Responses from the handicap category 1-9 to the question circle THREE of the following golf course characteristics that are central to your enjoyment of a game of golf

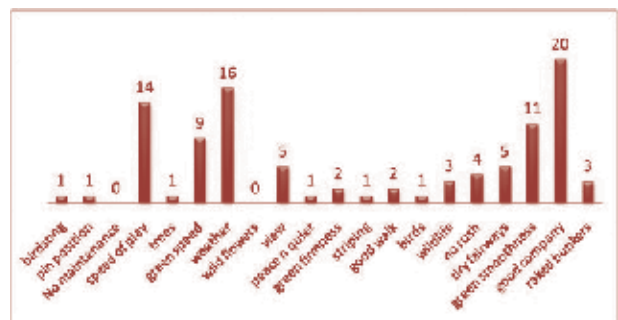


Figure 11. Responses from the handicap category 10-19 to the question circle THREE of the following golf course characteristics that are central to your enjoyment of a game of golf

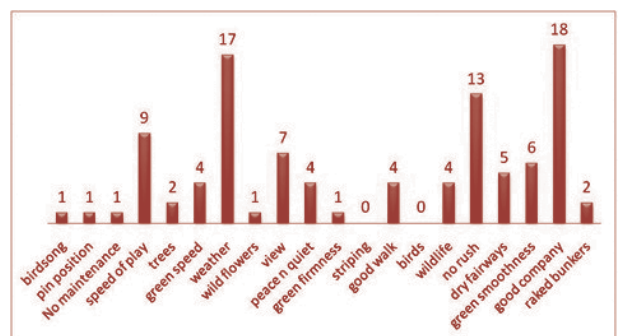


Figure 12. Responses from the handicap category 20+ to the question circle THREE of the following golf course characteristics that are central to your enjoyment of a game of golf