How well do you know your greens?

When you miss a short putt is it always your fault? Leaving aside the putter, the wind and the jangling of coins in your opponent's pocket, what else comes to mind? Could it be the surface of the green, which so often gets the blame for those three putts?
Yes it could, and more often than you might think, as Malcolm Peake tries out the Greenstester

From six feet, four out of ten putts can miss the hole on a poor surface. But until recently, there has been no way of quantifying the problem in an objective fashion. However, a new tool has been launched which helps to monitor the surface performance of greens throughout the year.

The Greenstester is an exciting and affordable new measuring tool which is supported by The R&A, and used for assessing objectively the reliability of putting surfaces. This will be of help to agronomists, Course Managers or any Golf Club officials to measure the consistency of their greens and for recording the information.

The idea for the Greenstester evolved because Nick Park, a long term member of The R&A Golf Course Committee, felt there was a requirement for an affordable tool which could regularly measure the trueness of golf greens. When golfers stand over a putt, if they stroke it on the right line and at the right pace they expect to have every chance of holing the putt.

The search then led back to an idea first used over a century ago. In 1908 Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey used a ramp on a snooker table to prove that most golf balls at that time had a centre of gravity that was not centred. He did this by aiming a succession of balls at a thimble placed on the black spot, released down the ramp from the 'D'. The equivalent of an 8 foot putt, some of the balls ended up in the corner pocket! The Greenstester was gradually developed after tests using the Stimpmeter.

Fintan Brennan, Course Manager at Portmarnock Hotel and Golf Links, had 15 years' experience in the steel industry, and with his engineer brother Ray immediately grasped the potential of the Holing Out test, and developed a special curved ramp.

The testing on the exceptional true fescue dominant greens of Waterville and Portmarnock Links produced excellent results, but it was felt the ramp needed to be trialed on a wider variety of playing surfaces. It was agreed that testing should be undertaken on my home

CAUSES OF POOR SURFACE PERFORMANCE

1. Variable growth of sward
2. Seeding Poa annua
3. Disease scars
4. Pitch marks
5. Moss/weeds
6. Foot printing on the green in swards with high organic content or thatch
7. Aeration and remedial work

THE BENEFITS OF THE TEST ARE

1. Monitoring reliability on a year-on-year comparison
2. Checking reliability after disruptive remedial greenkeeping work. Useful to reassure members and visitors
3. Checking reliability in advance of major club events
4. Saving costs by only mowing or rolling when necessary, especially off season

course of Temple, and I was soon invited to use other local courses such as Beaconsfield, Bearwood Lakes, The Berkshire, Hennerton, Maidenhead, and Stoke Park.

The Course Managers became involved in the tests, contributing with suggestions and comments on the performance of the prototypes, which helped define the final model.

The testing in Ireland was on a links course dominated by fescue grasses, while in the Thames Valley the testing was on downland, heathland and parkland with fescue, bent dominant or nearly pure Annual meadow grass (Poa annua) greens.

With some of the courses having push up greens over 100 years old, and others modern USGA type specification, we felt that nearly ever type of golf green in Northern Europe would be covered.

For over a year, with Temple's Course Manager Martin Gunn, we tested the reliability and speed of the their greens, and over the trial period we collected an immense amount of data.

It became clear from our anecdotal evidence that the dominant fescue/bent greens provided the most reliable putting surface for year round golf. As an aside: the fescue/bent greens suffered much less disease, required less fertiliser, pesticide and water applications, in fact were more economical to manage in every way.

At Temple this type of surface allows the golfer to play the course as the architect (Willie Park Jnr) intended, giving the golfer more options and more challenges.

The Club is using the information gathered and now micro managing the different greens to bring them to a similar high fescue/bent standard.

Recently I saw a piece in the Golf Course Architects magazine written by Dr David Greenshields - the R&D Manager at Barenbrug - describing the 4 year trials at the STRI which states that they strongly indicate that the preferred grass composition for golf greens under year-round play in the UK is a combination of fescue and bent. This has endorsed our anecdotal evidence using the Greenstester.

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Keith Adderley, Secretary at Temple, said: "Having been a fascinated observer during the process which saw the Greenstester conceived, tested and manufactured, I can see nothing but benefit from its use.

A simple and cost effective tool that, if used on a regular basis, will create a bank of meaningful and, more importantly, useful, statistical information relating to the performance of putting greens.

From where I sit the golf industry is onto a winner and what's more golfers seem genuinely interested in finding out more when they see the Greenstester being used on the course. It will benefit Course Managers, Secretary/Managers, Green Committees, and golfers.

This is one of the most exciting and affordable developments to hit the course maintenance market for many years."

Interpretation of results should be kept in context as even surfaces which record 10/10 from any given distance are only true and reliable on that day, and only on the line of the putt.

On one course used regularly for testing the Course Manager has found that he can reduce the mowing and/or rolling and still attain the required green speed and reliability, which has yielded savings in a number of areas.

All of these causes of poor surface performance are preventable on a well-built and well-maintained putting green except, perhaps, during periods of extreme weather.

The test is an aid to monitoring the reliability of putting surface, and should be used in conjunction with firmness and speed data.

The R&A will be reviewing the protocol and updating it as necessary. See www.randa.org/thegolfcourse for more detailed information.

The Greenstester is already gaining recognition around the world and one of the earliest agronomists to appreciate its benefits is Dr Micah Woods, Chief Scientist at the Asian Turf Centre, who took delivery of a Greenstester earlier this year and trialed it in Japan, India, the Philippines and Thailand.

He said "The R&A Holing Out Test is an important addition to the evaluation of putting green performance, because it allows us to measure something that is closely related to the game.

If we make a perfect stroke, is the green reliable enough that the ball will go in the hole?

Putting greens that are reliable, meaning that the ball goes where it is intended, are sure to reward good putters with more birdies. I, for one, am excited about that prospect."

So there we have it, an affordable tool which will assist Greenkeepers working to produce quality putting surfaces, whilst also providing golfers with more reliable greens for year round golf.

Those short putts might get a bit easier in the next year or two!

For more details see www.greenstester.com