



Jay Sigel

MAINTENANCE PRACTICES TO MAKE THE GAME MORE ENJOYABLE - A PLAYER'S VIEW

"I'd like to begin by commenting that TV has changed attitudes toward golf courses. Now they must be lush and green, even if dyed, and the ball must sit up so that even bad shots will hold a green. So much water is used that 6600 yard courses are playing at 7600. Beauty, design, bunker positioning, trees make golf courses, not color and not flowers.

While I'm certainly no expert in growing grass I believe that as maintenance budgets have gone up playability has gone down. That's the topic I'd like to touch on and I'd like to compare British and American golf courses based upon some of the experiences I've had.

At my club I hear the same comments I'm sure you hear - we have wet conditions many times, no carts available, sad faces because some of the older players or the high handicap golfers can reach only one par 4, no roll on the ball, embedded ball rule all the time, the golf shop is selling mostly rain shoes and members are carrying 5, 6 and 7 woods.

Many years ago when I started playing junior golf I remember the brownout effects on the golf courses, whether it was the budget or the unsophisticated maintenance practices at that time I don't know but there was always a six to eight week period of brown-out BUT, the course was playable and I can remember smiling faces at that time. The older players were getting more roll and the overall pace of play was better because people were scoring better and taking fewer shots. They could control their shots better. Carts could be used most of the time. Conditions weren't wet. I think a reduction in watering would strengthen the grass and would speed up play because players would take fewer shots and we all need to speed up play.

I'd like to compare what I've seen of British golf to our game here. They have no carts there. They pull their carts, or trolleys as they call them. The trolleys are very light and have very wide wheels so as not to injure the grass and they can go out any time.

I had an opportunity to play four golf courses, St. Andrews, Muirfield, Hillside and Royal Birkdale. The color of these golf courses is very drab. I've been told I shouldn't say 'brown' so I'll say drab. The grass height is of great interest. Approach fringes are very, very short enabling us during the Walker Cup matches to putt from as far out as 50 yards. How can we in Chicago or Philadelphia practice a 50 yard putt? It was a difficult adjustment and it's really a different game. The game over there is played on the ground, not in the air and a lot of people think there's more skill involved in playing the game on the ground and not, in effect, throwing darts like we do here.

I know I hit only two or three good shots in a round and I hit a number of shots that in no way should stay on the green. Here in America they may stop and back up; they may roll two or three feet. I'm wondering if we really need to do that. Roughs in Britain are very rough, contoured. A lie in the rough in Britain or Scotland requires either an enormous amount of strength or an enormous amount of intelligence to go sideways. In the Walker Cup matches the rough was so deep we had to ask the gallery to line up and hold hands, walking, in order to find the ball. I'm not suggesting we do that here, we'd never get finished!

The sand in the bunkers is firm and the bunkers are very deep and they're layered. It's an interesting concept that keeps the sand in the bunkers.

The only automated watering system that I know of in the British Isles is at Hillside. The greens are very firm. At Muirfield, which is one of the finest golf courses I've ever played, the greens aren't watered and I'm not sure they fertilize. If they fertilize, it's very little. The fairway mowers look like 19th century vintage and I'm sure their budget is very low. The greens are grainy in addition to being firm but because of their firmness they're consistent...not concrete but very firm.

Tony Jacklin made a comment recently that the reason American players are better players is because they're better putters. And the reason we're better putters is because we're brought up on better greens. There's really no comparison.

In Britain they don't play winter rules. In fact, they don't like the word. They don't know what Mulligans are either. On some of their golf courses, they don't even allow a practice swing on the first tee. I'm wondering what that would do for maintenance costs and speed of play.

I've begun to ask myself some questions about why we've gotten so far away from the conditioning of the courses where the game originated and away from an emphasis on good playability. I think we've been trying to improve turf conditions by increased fertilization, chemical programs and water usage, certainly increasing our budgets. There's been more mowing. I believe water increases the poa annua population and then we try to eradicate it. Our maintenance problems are compounded by these increased requirements. Additional water also causes problems with disease.

In 1977 in Monterey they had a terrible drought and were permitted to water the greens only five minutes a day and the tees a very short time. The condition of the golf course remained marvelous. I'm not suggesting we cut off all the water, but let's cut off some of it. We do have a dwindling supply and we'll be without water one of these days.

I don't think players have any objection to poa annua. It may not stay green but we all realize in Britain and Scotland golf is played on grass, not on color. I don't think the average player really knows the benefits of playing on a firm surface. Shouldn't we try to give this playability back to the game and at the same time, conserve our dwindling water supply? Wouldn't that help reduce some of our enormous maintenance costs, thereby saving many dollars for many of our clubs that are in troubled times?

I pose these questions but I certainly don't have answers. I thank you all for helping me learn and better understand some of your problems. I've learned a lot and I've enjoyed the regrettably brief association I've had with all of you."

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