

A NEW TURF MENACE

A topic discussed frequently during bull sessions amongst Chicago area golf course superintendents is the USGA stimpmeter. The majority of the comments are negative and yet our local chapters and our National GCSAA are afraid to take a stand on the stimpmeter issue. As a concerned turfgrass manager, I am going to stick my neck out and comment on this instrument, the USGA stimpmeter, which has become a thorn in the foot to many dedicated golf course superintendents. I realize I am not a million dollar money winning touring pro, but merely a golf course superintendent who is charged with maintaining the playing field to make the game of golf possible. I doubt if this letter will have any bearing on the issue at all, but anyway here I go!

In 1976, the USGA first brought the stimpmeter to the attention of the golfing public during the telecast of the U.S. OPEN. This introduction has been followed by a number of articles published in the USGA Green Section Record and in other golfing magazines. These articles have professed the opinion that the faster the putting surface the higher the quality of the putting green. Charts and tables have accompanied these articles stating what the USGA feels to be desirable speed readings for quality putting greens. These articles, charts, tables, stimpmeters and logic have gotten into the hands of the amateur, the low handicap country club members. All they feel they need is a stimpmeter and they feel that they can judge quality putting turf. They have no agronomic knowledge of soils, turfgrass varieties, or stress conditions, but base their opinions totally on the stimpmeter, a table and readings.

The following story may seem farfetched, but it actually happened in the northern suburbs of Chicago a couple years ago. There was this golfer, who happened to be a member of the Grounds of Green Committee of a neighboring country club, who got wind of the stimpmeter. He proceeded to purchase the device along with articles, charts, and tables. Instantly he felt he was an expert on judging quality putting turf. He began to experiment with his newly purchased toy at his home golf course, recording readings of putting green speed. After he had had his fill of reading of his own greens, he decided to trespass on neighboring golf courses to compare stimpmeter readings. I heard the fellow had visited my golf course, but I missed him! At a neighboring club he was confronted by the golf course superintendent and was lucky he did not get himself shot! In his spare time he visited a club or two a day, some in the mornings, others at night. He made some readings after a heavy rain, other times under the driest conditions. He did not know if the green had been mowed that day or double cut. He did not know the turfgrass variety or the height of cut. He did not know anything except how to roll a ball down an aluminum bar. When he had finished his reading, he compiled his so-called expert data and proceeded to hassle the golf course superintendent at his home golf course. It took some time, but the golf course superintendent was finally able to put the stimpmeter packing trespasser in his place!

This is a good example of how the stimpmeter has put the golf course superintendent under undue stress. As a professional turfgrass manager I know that one cannot expect the same from every putting green. Greens differ widely on a single 18 hole golf course. Different greens have different soil mixtures, different turfgrass varieties and different exposures to the elements. You should not be expected to produce the same stimpmeter reading under the varied conditions; one cannot do it and maintain quality turf.

Take the putting green bentgrass varieties, Washington, Toronto, Penncross, Congressional, Penneagle, Evansville, Seaside or the old South German mixture. They all differ to a degree in their response to height of cut, ability to withstand wet-hot humid conditions and their reaction to stress. Many of the older golf courses do not have the same variety of turf on all greens; they have 3 of this, 6 of that and 9 of the other. Add to this some greens with a USGA soil mix, others with a 1-1-1 mix and a few others with a clay base. You cannot standardize them and expect a club to shoot for a uniform stimpmeter reading on all greens at all times.

It is a common practice in the Chicago area for golf course superintendents to strive to maintain uniform, smooth, true and GREEN putting surfaces. We alter our management practices to the turfgrass variety, soil and weather conditions. We may raise the height of cut during hot-humid weather to avoid scalping. We irrigate to maintain a uniform moisture level. We follow preventative fungicide programs and strive to maintain a healthy turf. Our fertility practices are based on just enough nutrients to provide continual recovery from player damage. We topdress, aerify, spike, vericut, comb and brush as needed, to assure the best possible putting surface. These practices to produce a desirable putting turf are not based on a set stimpmeter reading, but instead on our agronomic and greenskeeping ability to provide our memberships a uniform, true, healthy and GREEN putting surface. 95 percent of the memberships at my club are not color blind; they can tell brown from green!

During this past summer I received a number of comments from members at my club concerning the television coverage of championship golf events. These people were wondering what was wrong with the greens on many of the golf courses that hosted USGA and PGA events. They noticed the brown turf. This condition stood out well on the television coverage of the USGA Women's Open which was held here in the Chicago area. As I understand it, on the Monday of the tournament week, the golf course superintendent was told to maintain the greens according to the desired stimpmeter readings for tournament play. It made no difference that the area had received a heavy rainfall the night before--go ahead, let's get that desired stimpmeter reading, mow the greens, mow them again; we want the speed! The results--SCALP!!

Neighboring golf course superintendents that day listened to their knowledge of putting green turf and not to some stimpmeter packing tournament official. Most golf course superintendents in the Chicago area that day elected to omit mowing their greens because of the wet soil conditions, and their greens stayed GREEN!! To me this was an excellent example of turfgrass abuse by the stimpmeter. Common sense, agronomic and greenskeeping knowledge were put aside in order to establish a set stimpmeter reading. True, not all greens were scalped that day by this action. Not all were the same; different grasses, different soils. The sad part is that the majority of the greens shown on television were the greens that were scalped the most. Was this fair to the membership of the host club to have this view shown of their club? Was it fair to them to be forced to play on recovering greens for the rest of the golfing season? Being a golf course superintendent myself, I can imagine how he felt; his heart was most likely broken. Yet, the stimpmeter is billed as a useful tool.

So far I feel fortunate, as yet I have not personally been confronted with the stimpmeter. But, I see it as an instrument that is doing more harm to the golf course superintendent than it could even do good. This harm

has come in the promotion of the stimpmeter, the placing of it into the hands of the sidewalk superintendent and the logic that the faster the putting surface the better, even if the turf will not tolerate it.

It seems unfair to me that an organization such as the USGA caters so closely to the low handicap golfer. Sure the touring pro and the under five handicap golfers claim they are better on fast greens. But over 90 percent of the membership at 99 percent of the golf courses do not fit into this class. The majority of the golfers like a putt that they feel they can control; it makes the game more enjoyable for them. Most golfers also love the color green, brown makes them feel that something is wrong. Brown goes with trouble; the more brown the member of a golf club sees, the more trouble the superintendent is in. There is that old saying of golf course superintendents, "When the grass is green, you are a hero; when it is brown, you are a bum!" This old saying still holds true today in the eyes of the average country club member.

The USGA has been beneficial for the golf course superintendent over the years. I have read the USGA Greens Section Record for over 18 years and still look forward to each issue. I have had problems, and the articles have helped me solve them. But this stimp-meter business is not in the best interest of the golf course superintendent, and it is not being received well. As it is, the golf course putting green is the most intensely cultivated crop in the world. No where do we find a plant continually put under such stress, and now we have the stimpmeter to stress our golfing turf further. I cannot help but feel---**STIMPMETERS ARE ANTI-GRASS.**

One who speaks for the grass,
Julius Albaugh, Golf Course Supt.
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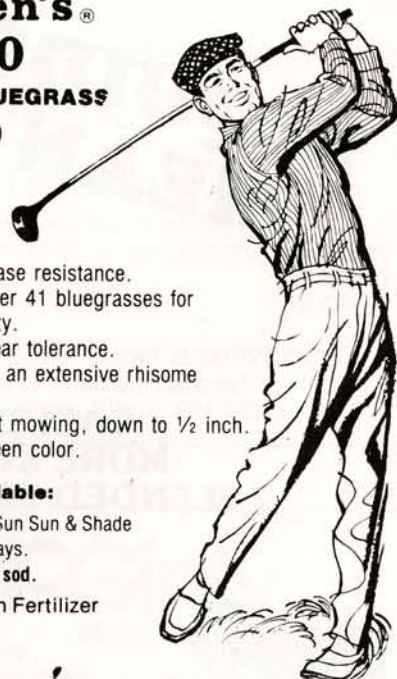
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