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Facts and Fallacies of Fast Greens

by James T. Snow, Director
Northeastern Region USGA Green Section

In retrospect, the introduction of the Stimpmeter by the USGA in 1976 foreshadowed major changes for the way golf courses are maintained and for the way the game itself is played. By enabling golf course superintendents to easily determine the speed of greens, the Stimpmeter has greatly expanded our understanding of how maintenance practices can be manipulated to control green speed. As a result, golfers at every level throughout the country are enjoying faster, truer putting surfaces on a day to day basis than ever before.

While their greens have been fast and smooth, however, the road that the superintendent has been forced to accommodate these changes has occasionally been slow and bumpy. Interested but uninformed golfers and club officials have placed heavy pressure on the superintendent to produce consistently ultrafast greens at their courses, testing the limits of the health of the turf and sometimes pushing it over the edge. Along the way, rumors and misinformation have pervaded every locker room with respect to how fast the greens should be, how to get them that way, and what might happen if they're pushed too hard.

One of the indisputable facts today is that greens are generally faster than they were only a few years ago. A national survey done by the USGA Green section in 1976 showed that the average green rolled approximately 6 feet 6 inches according to the Stimpmeter, whereas the average green today is probably closer to 8 feet. It's also a fact that most golfers have short memories. Though greens are faster than ever, complaints about slow greens are more common than ever.

So how fast is fast? In my view, the following offers a reasonable perspective on the subject.

- Fast for regular play 8' to 9'
- A reasonable range, 7'6" to 9'
- Ultra-fast for regular play, above 9'6"
- An unreasonable range, above 9' at all times

Due to the vagaries of the weather and other circumstances, it is impossible to maintain a precise green speed throughout the year, but maintaining speeds between 7'6" and 9' should be feasible. Speeds of 9' should be established only for special occasions. Trying to keep green speeds above 9' at all times, as desired by some golfers, often results in serious problems and should be avoided.

Paying the Piper

Achieving fast greens has been well studied and involved proper mower maintenance and adjustment along with the manipulation of cultural factors such as fertilization, irrigation, topdressing, verticutting, rolling, etc. To achieve ultra-fast greens, all of these programs must be pushed to the limit. In the process, extreme stress is placed on the turf and jeopardizes its very survival during periods of difficult weather. If a goal of maintaining fast or ultra-fast greens throughout the season is ever to be achieved, then a real effort must be made to control or minimize other stress factors as much as possible.

These include:

- poor drainage

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FAST GREENS

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- moisture stress due to a poor irrigation system or improper irrigation practices
- soil compaction
- diseases, insects and nematodes
- unreasonable traffic (e.g., play during bad weather, winter play, etc.)
- tree effects (shade, root competition, poor air circulation)

Despite efforts to control these stress factors, however, following through with all of the practices necessary to produce consistently fast or ultra-fast greens can thin and weaken the turf to such an extent that many undesirable consequences can occur. Among the problems observed:

- establishment of moss and algae
- encroachment of crabgrass, goosegrass and other weeds
- proliferation of summer patch, take-all patch and other difficult to control stress related diseases

Trying to maintain consistently ultra-fast greens means always living on the edge of disaster, and once golfers become used to these fast greens, they expect them to be that way all of the time. The superintendent is then locked into a maintenance program which at best will make him a nervous wreck, but which ultimately could spell disaster. In the end, the piper will be paid!

Recommendations

- Try to keep the speed of your greens in the reasonable range of 7'6" to 9'. Aim for the 8' to 9' range if you wish but recognize that green speeds will vary from day to day and season to season.
- Avoid getting caught up in the race for ultrafast greens, striving for speeds of 9'6" only on very special occasions, if at all.
- Explain to your club officials about the potential consequences of trying to maintain consistently ultra-fast greens.
- Be on the lookout for the symptoms of weakness noted earlier, and be prepared to compromise your green speed goals in an effort to strengthen the turf.

In the long run, the game of golf will be best served by taking a reasonable approach to managing green speeds, avoiding the excesses which can only result in dead grass and unhappy golfers.

OUR COLLABORATOR, June 1988

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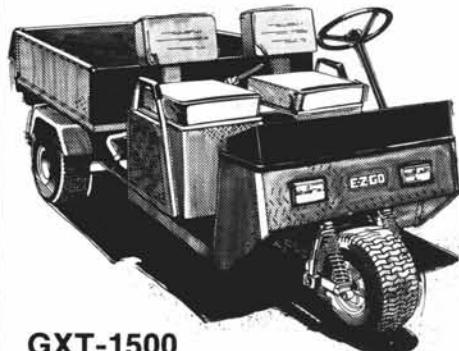
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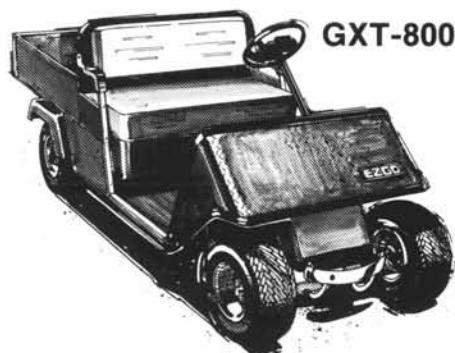
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