

# Then and Now, The Concern Over Spike Marks on Our Putting Surfaces

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Back in the mid-'70s, I worked in the locker room at Westmoreland C.C. My main duty was to polish shoes for members and guests while they were playing golf. When the golfers completed their rounds, we would polish their golf shoes to a fine mirror-quality finish. Upon completion of the shoe shine, we would then replace any worn or missing steel spikes. Yes, back in those days, metal spikes would and did wear down. As I recall, we would replace spikes after every third round played.

As the years passed, I began to notice that the golf spikes were growing longer. The dimple around the spike was increasing in depth and the turf was being mowed closer than ever. At about the same time, some brilliant person discovered that if you made spikes out of tungsten carbide, you would rarely need to replace spikes before you would wear out the shoe itself. These new spikes, combined with increased play, resulted in the wearing down of clubs' front entrances, paths, stairs, carpets, etc. to the point where these items were replaced annually or biannually, rather than the typical every three to five years. Management considered this to be the cost of doing business, and in fact, this continued until the game of golf itself was affected.

As golf's popularity increased and the membership populations grew younger, superintendents began to hear about a phenomenon called "spiking," caused by foot traffic on a green. I do not know if the spikes themselves were at the root of the problem, or if increased play



brought it about, or whether golfers' expectations of what constituted acceptable course conditions had changed. Most likely, the recognition that spiking was a problem arose from a combination of the three.

To combat this greens spiking, many superintendents began to use growth regulators. The idea behind the use of these growth regulators was to produce a finer, tighter turf with a more upright growth pattern. The growth regulators also reduced the number of surface runners (grain) on the greens. This, in turn, decreased the number of runners that would have a chance to pop up and disturb the playing surface during the day. Other superintendents began to mow greens in the morning and again in the afternoon so that later-day players and morning players alike would enjoy putting freshly cut greens.

**I believe it was 1993 when we first heard the words "soft spike."**

At first, the concept was slow to catch on, but then the movement gained steam. Many of the private clubs began to transition from metal to alternative spikes. To the amazement of many superintendents and golf professionals, even some of the touring pros began to wear soft spikes at Tour events.

In fact, a recent conversation with Brad Sullivan, assistant executive director of the Illinois PGA, brought to my attention that in all IPGA-sanctioned events, players are required to wear soft spikes, or—as Brad stated—"non-metal" spikes. Brad also believes that 90% of all IPGA professionals use soft spikes all the time, tournament setting or not.

As part of my research into this issue, I contacted the PGA Tour office in Florida to find out if any statistics documented how many touring professionals were using the soft spikes while competing in PGA-sanctioned events. Unfortunately, no record exists of how many players, or what percentage of players, were using soft spikes. However, I remember hearing on TV that 55 to 70% of players now wear soft spikes some of the time. And the rate of use of soft spikes is even greater among Senior Tour players.

I provide this extensive history and background to support my main point: I see an alarming trend among several golf shoe manufacturers that must be addressed. Have any of you walked into the golf shop lately and taken notice of the new,

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molded type of golf shoe being produced by companies such as Nike, Etonic and Reebok? These shoes are nothing more than the football shoes that have been used for decades on fields featuring a synthetic playing surface that goes by the name of "Astroturf."

The advertisement for the Nike Air Zoom soft spike golf shoe states that its 118 points of contact were specifically designed and engineered for maximum grip with minimum damage. Judging from the turf damage I have seen this shoe create, I would change that phrase to a more appropriate statement, such as "these 118 points of contact were specifically designed to grip and rip the turf" so the foursomes behind you as well as the course superintendent can "cry foul all day long."

The Etonic Difference, however, is perhaps the most turf-tearing shoe I have ever seen. It has countless 1/8" diamond-shaped spikelets that scuff and tear up putting surfaces. These tear the turf to the point where we have had to send men out the next day to cup out the denuded areas shredded apart by these shoes. Believe me, they leave a tell-tale pattern behind. The Reebok shoe

is similar, featuring a series a V-shaped grooves that extend out 3/8". These patterns leave inden-

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tations in the turf until it grows level with the surrounding turf some two-three days later.

My intent here is not to slam these shoe manufacturers, but to point out the irony here. I believe that the whole concept behind the soft spike movement was to eliminate the damaging effects of metal-spike golf shoes. The goal behind introducing soft spikes was to provide quality putting surfaces in both morning and afternoon.

Not all golfers who wear the above-mentioned shoes are out there disrupting putting surfaces. It is the foot dragger and the person who turns on the balls of his/her feet who cause the majority of turf problems. In my experience, traffic from metal spikes actually causes less damage, and the damage heals much more rapidly, than the damage caused by golfers walking improperly with the new multistudded shoes.

In closing, I urge all shoe manufacturers to reconsider their golf product lines, if for no better reason than their love of and commitment to the game. One of the prominent movements we are seeing in golf right now is the "bigger is better" mentality. We now have oversized irons and oversized drivers; for the good of the game, we do not need oversized and overstudded soft spike shoes! 

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## GCSAA News

 Novartis, Rain Bird, Textron and Purcell Technologies, in partnership with the GCSAA, have announced the call for entries for the 2000 Environmental Steward Awards. The award seeks to recognize the accomplishments of golf course superintendents around the world who have demonstrated a commitment to environmental stewardship efforts on the golf course. Applications

are available through the GCSAA Service Center (800-472-7878) and from each of the sponsors. You can also print out an application from the GCSAA's Web site ([www.gcsaa.org](http://www.gcsaa.org)) and submit your entry electronically. Deadline is October 1, 1999.

Now available on the GCSAA Web site: articles to post at your facility or publish in your facility's newsletter! The topics

range from golf course etiquette and turf management terminology to pesticide application and lightning safety. Download articles from the GCSAA Web site at [www.gcsaa.org/golfers/for-golfer\\_fr.html](http://www.gcsaa.org/golfers/for-golfer_fr.html) or call the GCSAA Service Center at 800-472-7878 for assistance. If you submit an article for publication in your facility newsletter, please give credit to the GCSAA. 