It's a Good Tool — Use with Caution and Restraint

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Probably in 1935 when Edward S. Stimpson developed his idea of the stick to measure, with comparative accuracy, the speed of a putting green, it caused no hardship on anyone, and probably wasn't used very extensively either.

But in the mid-1970s, when the USGA Green Section resurrected this tool and made it available to its Green Section subscribers, I was apprehensive. Writing to Al Radko and Carl Schwartzkof, I discussed these concerns. The fears had to do with competition of speed of greens — between clubs with nothing else in common except that both have nine or 18 putting greens; no regard to budgets; terrain, soil, variety of grasses climate, amount of traffic, etc. Additionally, I posed the question, "What makes the golfer, professional or amateur, believe he can strike the ball so perfectly each time that he would know whether one green speed is different from another?"

All of the factors mentioned have a definite bearing on putting green quality and, closely akin, to putting green speed. Agronomic principles must be followed to produce quality putting greens. This was borne out in the symposium on fast greens in Milwaukee a few years ago.

At the January, 1983, Virginia Turfgrass Conference, a panel of seven discussed "Putting Green Management for Quality and Speed." In essence, all agreed that only good management will produce quality putting green turf, which in itself includes reasonably fast greens. To obtain tournament fast greens (10'6" and up), quality must be present! Thus it is impossible to distinguish between the two. I believe we would agree that only to lower the height of cut to gain faster speeds would surely cause dead grass. Therefore, before we can yield to the urge to quicken the speed of our greens, we *must* have produced superior turf that is agronomically sound to achieve and retain good grass conditions.

The Stimpmeter was used by USGA officials to control green speed at the 1976 U.S. Open, played at the Atlanta Athletic Club, and publicized to a degree. Sports commentators wrote about it in newspapers and magazines and broadcast it on television, and the contest was on. Repeatedly we hear how fast greens are, and the process of comparing one with another has materialized. Surely it has caused problems to some grass and undoubtedly to those caring for it.

In spite of these prospective problems for some, we have found a way to use the Stimpmeter to our advantage on our three golf courses at The Greenbrier. If viewed objectively, I feel it may benefit your operation as well. I would like to discuss some of the positive factors you might consider.

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Uniform fertilizer applications are essential for uniform putting green speeds.

(Above) Delmonte rake removing excessive thatch from a green. Heavy thatch affects green speed and putting consistency.

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We devised a simple mimeographed sheet to be completed by our three foremen. Each foreman takes a Stimpmeter reading daily on two of his greens, making certain notations. These notations are: number of the green, the weather, time of day, and whether it is wet or dry. He then checks two different greens on successive days until all 18 have been measured. This procedure is repeated throughout the season.

We have found certain truisms. Our courses will never be the same because of different types of bentgrasses and soil mixes used in their construction. All greens on the same course will seldom putt at the same speed. The location or setting of each green and how it is subjected to wind and sun cause it to be different. The amount of contamination, such as *Poa annua,* will cause a difference. Greens are always slower during the spring and in wet weather. Greens, generally speaking, are faster in the fall. There is a definite influence on speed following most maintenance practices.

We have tried to fine tune our management practices to produce the least amount of change possible. Fine tuning includes frequent light vertical mowing every two weeks instead of heavy monthly vertical mowings. We also mow our greens seven days a week instead of six or less. Frequent light topdressings are accomplished every three or four weeks instead of three or four times annually. Light, frequent fertilizer applications are made and provide slow, steady growth and recovery from player damage. We water as infrequently as the grass will allow, but enough to retain color and resiliency to hold a well-executed shot. We avoid frequent saturations. It is essential to mechanically check and service green mowers daily as opposed to a haphazard schedule. And there are other points. But please note that these same procedures will also produce the quality turf so necessary to answer the demands of today's golfer and, at the same time, permit us close mowing.

Routinely recording the Stimpmeter speeds daily forces us to react to any large differences. There is a reason! Find it! Correct it! Without a doubt, our biggest culprit is the mower. We have found that we spend approximately four times the number of hours (and expense) on putting green mower maintenance than we did only a few years ago. Machines must be right! Sharp! And set accurately! Operators must be instructed on proper mowing techniques.

What does all this mean? We are using the Stimpmeter as a tool to measure our maintenance practices in a very positive way. The result: a finer putting surface for our golfers. It is probably true that 90 percent of America's golfers score best on slow greens. But from my 30-plus years as a superintendent, I believe even they prefer fast greens. Perhaps this is true because they feel they are playing on the same surfaces that the professionals expect and enjoy.

I personally like fast greens and always have. For years now, I have marveled at the guy who can have good turf and a dense, uniform stand of bentgrass that is as slick as a pool table. But to me, an ideal putting speed is between 8 and 9 feet. According to the USGA Stimpmeter pamphlet, this is "medium" under tournament conditions. But it is "fast" for regular play. I know that an 8- to 9-foot speed at The Greenbrier creates good comments from our guests and believe they remember us, and to some degree, for our greens!

I believe the USGA Green Section did us a favor in making the Stimpmeter available. We have another tool to help us do a better job. And in our effort to produce

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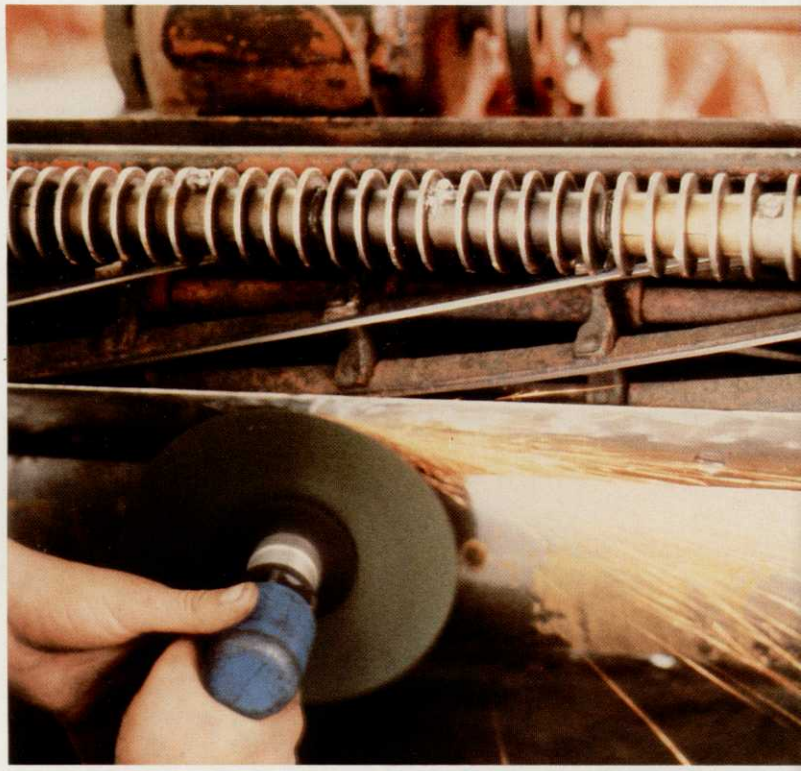
Some superintendents will add weights to their greens mowers for faster green speeds.



A thin bed knife, a straight edge, a sharp mower and Weihle rollers add up to close cutting.

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better grass for better golf, we need all the help we can get! True, the Stimpmeter created a lot of attention both by me and others, but it caused us to look at it, to investigate its potential and then to find a way to use it to our advantage. I do not believe club members should use it for comparing their greens with the neighbor's or with those on TV. Frankly, I feel we must use it ourselves to compare our own greens, one with another, trying for consistency, but not with other clubs in town or across the country. Further, I believe the USGA recognizes that the differences in golf course location, terrain, budgets, and personal desire will dictate conditions and ultimately green speed. Further, the USGA's attempt to promote consistency within the same course is the primary and ultimate goal, not necessarily to match or duplicate the speed attained at other courses.

I've used and appreciate the Stimpmeter, but I encourage caution and restraint, especially in trying to duplicate the speed of greens at so-called championship courses. Let's agree to use this tool for our benefit and ignore the remarks made on TV that create competition for speed, just for speed's sake.

What causes a golfer, professional or otherwise, to believe he can stroke a putt so consistently that he could ever declare one green is faster or slower than another?

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Too much water affects putting quality and eventually grass quality.