

Our Watered-Down Game

Turn Off the Sprinklers and Play Some Real Golf

BY BRAD FAXON

Golf in America is too green.

I'm serious. What American golf needs is a good old-fashioned water shortage. Green is pretty. It's beautiful. It's pleasing to look at. I like green. But it doesn't make golf courses play the way they should — the way they were meant to play.

Green means lush. Green equals soft. And soft isn't good. Over-watered golf courses have become standard in America. The word "roll" isn't even in an American player's vocabulary anymore. I think that's unfortunate. The scope of the problem, however, goes way beyond the setup of PGA Tour courses.

America's obsession with green has changed golf. The way American courses are maintained has changed the way equipment is made, the way courses are designed and the way people swing.

Look at the courses. All of a sudden, we're playing courses where you've got to hit the ball up in the air and stop it. Architecture went from Tillinghast, Mackenzie and Ross to Nicklaus and Dye. The game went from horizontal to vertical.

Look in your bag. Perimeter-weighted clubs make the ball go higher. (The better to play those new courses.) Square grooves make the ball spin and stop quicker out of the rough. And then there's the lob wedge. (The better to escape Pete Dye death-bunkers.) The old Brits never had an L-wedge. They never needed one off those tight lies.

Look at the swings. We went from swings like Ben Hogan and Byron Nelson to more upright swings like Tom Watson and Jack Nicklaus, guys who hit the ball real high. The current popular swing has become more upright.

Go back to the history of golf in Scotland. Courses were just laid out on the ground somewhere near the coast. They had no irrigation. They relied totally on the weather. Golf was played along the ground. The elements made the conditions tough. And you had a sand-based soil that was easy to keep firm. There were a lot of tight, hard fairway lies and you had to bump the ball along the ground and allow for roll.

I'm not blaming American superintendents. If there's a brown spot on a country club these days, the greens committee calls an emergency meeting. I think club members see the Bob Hope Classic or the Masters on television and say, "That's what we ought to have."

So their courses look great but they don't play the way they should. I grew up on a classic old Donald Ross course, Rhode Island CC. The first hole is a short par 4, open in front of the green. When I started out as a caddie, the members would hit a 5- or 6-iron, land it 10 or 15 yards short of the green and let it bounce onto the putting surface. That's how you played. You used the contours and allowed for them.

When I went back to play there during college, maintenance had changed the course. I hit 5-irons out of the rough that backed up. Balls stuck on the greens. The course was so much softer and easier. People at the club said, "Brad, this is the best this course has ever been." I said, "No, this is the greenest it's ever been." And they didn't know what I was talking about.

Green is OK if it's firm. That isn't usually the case in the U.S., where over-watering reigns. Warwick Hills, home of the Buick Open, is one of the longest courses we play and always gives up some

of the lowest scores. I played there Monday after the tournament and talked to the head pro. He told me the superintendent is scared to death the tour will starve his course and he won't be able to keep it green after the tournament. So he drenches it for two weeks before, but we had rain this year, our drives plugged and we played preferred lies the first few rounds.

You want to know why foreign players are dominating professional golf? Because they play firm courses in the wind and still play bump-and-run shots and have a lot of imagination. American players have had those shots taken from them. The courses are too lush.

Remember what Jose Maria Olazabal did at the final hole of the Masters? He pulled his iron shot and it ran down the slope. He was past the hump in the middle of the green. He played what I think was the shot of the tournament, a bump-and-run down the hill, and saved par. It was an incredible shot. If that had been the Buick Open, say, he would've just pulled out a sand wedge, flipped it up and stuck it next to the flagstick. Where's the challenge in that?

The United States GA has the right idea. When it was deciding whether to go back to Newport CC, a true links, for the 100th anniversary of the U.S. Amateur, the club's membership was in favor of the idea and said, "Don't worry, we'll make sure you get a sprinkler system in by 1995." The USGA told them, "If you put in a sprinkler system, we're not going to hold the event there."

That's the way golf was meant to be. Now, what do you say we turn off the sprinklers and play some real golf?