

Haas rises to challenge with Mod-Sod

Golfer, inventor feels solution under foot



Fred Haas stands on his Mod-Sod "The Modern Grasse" cart path on the first hole of Arnold Palmer's Jeremy Ranch Golf Club, Salt Lake City.

By VERN PUTNEY
PGA Senior Tour veteran Fred Haas, who has had an important impact on the game of golf as a player, believes he can provide a major step in speeding up play, one of the thorniest problems course superintendents and owners face.

Haas, who at 73 is the oldest PGA Senior Tour member, except when Sam Snead decides to play, is fine-tuning the artificial turf Mod-Sod that he has patented. It could be a breakthrough in the time struggle that course operators have been wrestling with since the post-World War II playing boom.

The National Golf Foundation's latest golfer survey found that 87 percent of those questioned want to play golf more often. But 70 percent cited lack of time and 25 percent said course crowding dissuaded them.

Haas, of Metairie, La., claims his Mod-Sod can be used as parking areas near tees and greens with no course-damaging effects. Rather than the current park-and-walk practice, golfers can drive closer to the ball and not risk ranger wrath.

Haas thinks cart path philosophy must be changed. For time purposes alone, he contends, course operators should consider linking areas just off the tees to similar spaces close to the greens in as straight a line as possible. The more rounds played, the more revenue from green and cart fees.

A big advantage of the product he's been refining for more than a decade is its texture. A ball striking the surface won't bounce crazily, as it would when landing on asphalt or macadam cart paths.

"The bounce is true," said Haas, "the same as a ball hitting in the fairway or rough."

Riley Stottern, course superintendent at Jeremy Ranch Golf Course in Park City, Utah, backs Haas' bounce claim. "I talked with Arnold Palmer and Haas about Mod-Sod on a particularly tight area of our par five 16th hole," he said. "A ball hit only slightly off-line would strike the macadam cart path and head for the water. Not only would the ball likely be lost, but there would be up to a five-minute playing delay while the search went on."

"This problem no longer exists," said Stottern, past president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. "We're looking at a half-dozen other places for Mod-Sod installation, as a time-saving step and perhaps avoidance of an unfair penalty shot."

Haas originally envisioned Mod-Sod as largely a substitute for greens. He's discovered a variety of practical applications around- and not confined to - the course.

For instance, the greatest time-waster with carts under the 90-degree format that most courses employ, is the practice of hewing to the edge of fairway or rough until it's time to proceed to the ball. How about pursuing a path almost "straight down the middle" from tee to green? Haas asks.

A group from Hobe Sound, Fla., recently broached the subject to Haas.

"We're mostly senior players, straight but not too long off the tee. We seldom stray from the fairway, and if we didn't have the mandatory back-and-forth car shuttle from rough to ball to rough, we could make excellent time," they reasoned.

Driving a conveniently connected line from tee parking area to green fringe, no-nonsense seniors would go around much more quickly.

The to-and-fro pattern proved almost too much for one Colorado course. When conditions are right, women can be more than a match for men in playing time. However, the combination of hugging the rough after a 150-yard shot, a 125-yard walk to the ball (a repeat process on a 400-yard hole) and another 75-yard walk back to the cart after holing out proved too taxing. Walking included scaling a few mounds. Colorado's terrain isn't the flattest.

Some women foursomes were taking almost seven hours for 18 holes, observed out-of-patience standout senior player Betty O'Brien of Denver.

That's harmful to course economic health as well as tempers.

Walkways, breezeways and coverings for wooden bridges are other fringe golf course uses.

A wooden walkway at the PGA National course at Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., from the pro shop to the putting green, four years ago was crumbling under constant contact with golf spikes. Mod-Sod was installed and, according to Haas, is holding up beautifully.

Sand traps are another area receiving close scrutiny by Haas.

"Six inches of sand atop a Mod-Sod base should do the job," declares Haas. "Sand won't be lost. New sand is terrible to play out of,

and is expensive."

Chipping areas around practice greens can take a beating and are prime Mod-Sod targets. Also on Haas' drawing board are three-hole courses for beginners and the not-too-serious player.

"Cost would be \$1 (for three holes), \$3 for nine holes," Haas said. "That would make the game affordable for the average wage earner who might have eyed golf as recreation but hesitated because of the price tag."

Gene Sarazen, former Masters champion and for a half-century prominent in game development, likes Haas' speedup concept. The Connecticut Squire thinks strategic Mod-Sod installation would lessen current exasperating times from 30 to 45 minutes.

Julius Boros, another Nutmeg State native in Sarazen's swift playing vein, backs any device that would cut course time.

Florida-based Boros long has shaken his head at the "Snowbirds," as the Northerners who flee winter's harsh grip are labeled. Their habit often is to drive the golf cart from one side of the fairway to the other. Sometimes by the time they've made it to the 16th or 17th hole, they've run out of gas.

Boros daily would place extra carts at these locations. It saved a lot of calls to the pro shop or maintenance shack and avoided the possibility of disgruntled guests trudging to the clubhouse. A more direct route from tee to green is preferable, so it's understandable that Boros would line up behind Haas' idea.

Haas feels Mod-Sod is the answer to demand by younger, stronger tournament-minded players for "Tiger Tees." This means driving from the extreme length of the course. The game's bombers like to "let out the shaft" and still have more than a half-wedge shot to the green.

Installation of a 4-by 6-foot Mod-Sod piece for \$250 would serve the "playing from the tips" purpose and would pose no maintenance problem.

While Haas' product seems to have found favor with the game's veterans and likely will be considered carefully by course

developers as golf expands, his pitch for conversion to Mod-Sod greens nationwide has brought a "Go Slow" approach.

Dr. Glenn Burton, the U. S. Department of Agriculture's research geneticist at the Coastal Plain Experiment Station, in Tiffin, Ga., is among the skeptics. He questions satisfactory use of artificial turf as greens. "It's hard to duplicate Nature," said Burton.

In his 53 years with USDA, Burton has witnessed many failed attempts to modify bent grass. He noted that, even with the climate advantage in Georgia, compared

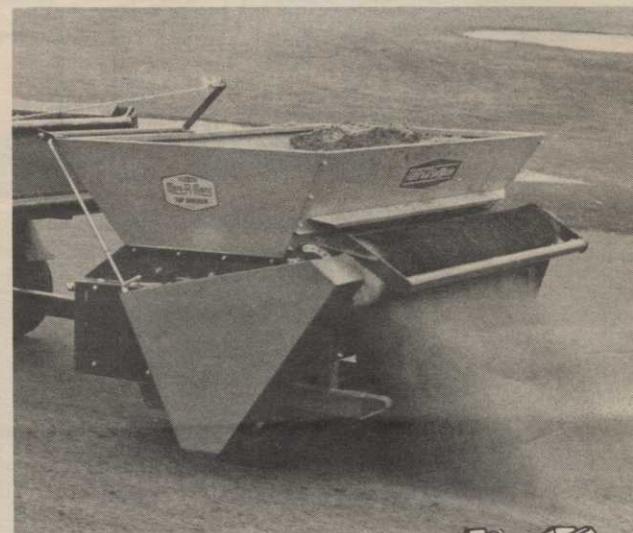
to Florida, experiments and tests met with little success.

Haas isn't discouraged, though. He believes his venture will mushroom with proper financing, that maintenance reduction by 50 to 75 percent is a major factor, and that the substitute soil carpet which requires so little care, yet plays like dry bent grass, is another strong selling point.

Ron Edgecomb is weighing Mod-Sod installation at his 18-hole par 3 Westerly Winds course in Westbrook, Maine. This type course traditionally takes a beating from largely game beginners.

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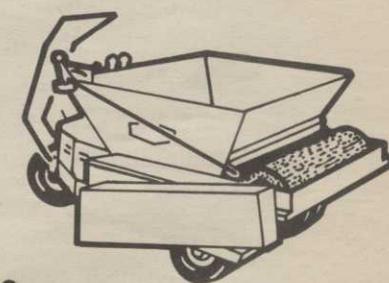
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