

Fast greens a product of technology

BY PETER BLAIS

A seemingly well-placed pitch shot rolls off the back of the green. A 10-foot putt comes to rest nine feet past the hole.

The golfer's fault for misreading the shots? Maybe.

The architects' error for designing greens where it's too difficult to stop the ball? Perhaps.

But increasingly the blame can be laid on improved mowers that allow greens to be cropped closer than originally intended, and on club members who demand it be done.

Until 15 years ago, most greens were cut between 3/16- and 1/4-of-an-inch, according to Jim Snow, an agronomist with the United States Golf Association Green Section. It was virtually impossible for the equipment available then to cut any closer.

But championship bed knives available on today's mowers allow a cut as low as 1/8-inch. What that has meant is much faster putting surfaces, said Snow.

For instance, a 1976 USGA Stimpmeter (a device for measuring green speed) test of more than 1,000 greens nationwide yielded an average green speed of six feet, six inches. But you're more likely to find an honest politician than a "six-six" today.

"I haven't tested one in the last seven or eight years that's been that slow," said Snow. "Most have got to be between 7-1/2 and eight now. Fifteen years ago it was unusual to find an eight. Today, it's common.

"That's quite a substantial difference. It means that on a lot of the older courses styles of play have changed. It requires more skill to hold a ball on the green than it used to."

Sometimes it's the architect who takes it on the chin from the disgruntled golfer who has a hard time playing a course that, before the advances in mower technology, he may have found more enjoyable. But unless a course designer was blessed with the ability to read the future, it appears to be a bad rap.

"A green that was perfectly fair 20 years ago can be pretty fast today. Maybe we should have foreseen the changes (in mowers)," said architect Geoffrey Cornish.

Architect Arthur Hills believes the extra speed generated from lower cuts can be overcome by proper placement of the cups.

"Most greens have adequate cup placements on them," said the Toledo, Ohio designer. "Those areas have to be realized and cups not cut where they shouldn't be. I've seen people who were gleeful after placing cups on top of mounds. I don't think that's fun for anybody and it certainly doesn't meet the design of the course."

Superintendents would appear to have the final say regarding their greens. They realize the danger in keeping greens too short and possibly scaring off the average mem-

ber who can get frustrated with his ballooning scores.

But the superintendent is usually answerable to a greens committee, consisting mainly of a club's better golfers. These low-handicappers tend to like the challenge and prestige of close-cropped greens and instruct the superintendent how to cut them.

"When you talk about speed, what it usually boils down to is you do what your membership wants," said Kevin Ross, superintendent of Falmouth Country Club, where the greens are among the fastest in Maine. "Here they want them

fast, but not too fast. I'll give them whatever they want, as long as it's playable.

"But overall, there's too much emphasis on speed of greens. It's gotten way out of hand over the last five years. I'd rather have a finely cut, true, medium-fast green than a super-fast, super-hard one. Unfortunately, the average golfer is out there three-putting a lot of greens and having a miserable time."

Not only is longer grass more playable, it also tends to be healthier.

"Moss is becoming a big prob-

lem on short-cut greens," said Ross. "Moss grows where nothing else does. But it's tough for grass to survive with just 1/8-inch of photosynthetic surface area. Grass cut that low is subject to a lot more stress. Traffic, heat, moss and algae are more of a problem on short greens."

Ross has also noticed more winter kill than ever at Northeast courses over the past five years. The major damage has occurred at the better courses, where greens tend to be cropped closer, he added.

Ross sees little movement away

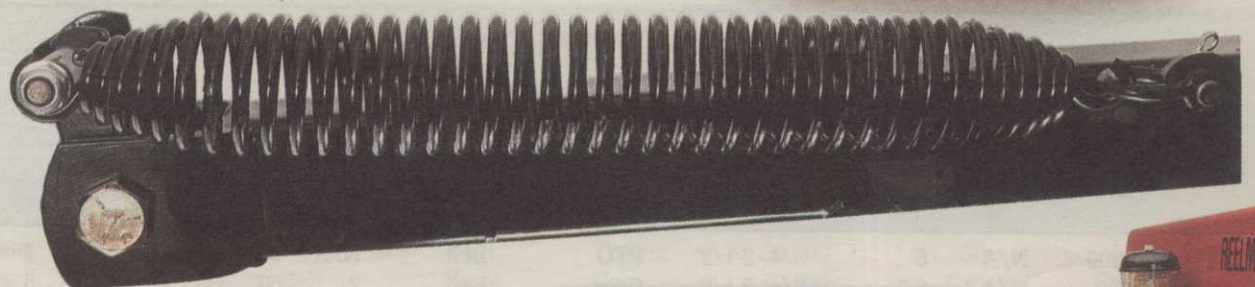
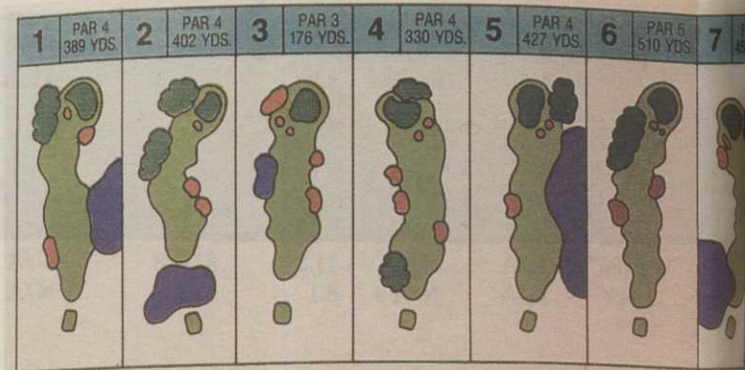
from the more-is-better mentality regarding green speed. He worries what this could mean to the health of his and other courses. But improved technology, which created the problem, could also provide a cure.

"The new groomers on the market can get a little higher cut with better ball speed," Ross said. "Bentgrass usually creeps along horizontal with the ground. The new groomers make it stand up and let you get a better cut at a greater height. We're getting the new groomers on our walking mowers this year."

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