

Superintendents moved to anger over 'conditioning' criteria

By MARK LESLIE

The debate over whether to rate a course's conditioning when ranking it, has stirred superintendents to anger and panelists to don flak jackets ever since *Golf Digest* began its rankings with conditioning as one of several criteria in 1985.

Superintendents complain course raters don't take into account special and dynamic circumstances that confront them. "Soil conditions, drainage

topography, amount of play, ownership directives, budgetary restraints and weather are only a few of the many factors that are considered when it comes to grooming a course. No two courses are the same even if they're next door to each other," said Richard Staughton, superintendent at Colonial Charters Golf Club in Longs, S.C., whose condition was criticized in one poll. "Keeping a course in top-notch shape

requires routine maintenance practices such as aerifying, top dressing and verticutting."

"If anything, I've tried to de-emphasize conditioning in the Golf Magazine poll," said that publication's survey coordinator, architect Tom Doak. "That's why we have 60 or 70 panelists. Some haven't seen the course for 10 years. They can't be voting on what kind of condition it is in today. They may have heard about its condition, but using that

[using secondhand information] is wrong."

Ron Whitten, who directs the various *Golf Digest* polls, defends his inclusion of conditioning. That evaluation is removed from calculations two years after a panelist last sees the facility, he said, "so a course is not penalized if it has changed conditioning. That is one area we think we need to keep more up-to-date on."

Shot values, he said, "are far and away the most important

factor. So we double that number. Everything else has equal value, equal weight. Some think that should not be true of conditioning. But you can have a great golf course that people like even if it is in bad condition. And there is some great conditioning on ordinary designs that elevate the courses. It shakes out pretty well."

Golf Digest's 700 panelists are told to rank courses — from one to 10 — on shot values, resistance to scoring, playability, design balance, memorability, aesthetics and conditioning. Their findings are published in the magazine's lists of America's 100 Greatest, America's 75 Best Public Courses and 75 Best Resort Courses, the annual Best New Public and Private Courses, and Best Courses in each state.

Doak complained that "with a lot of raters, if the greens were aerified yesterday, [to them] the course was in lousy shape. That's stupid, but they don't know much better than that."

But Whitten said: "Our panelists understand routine aerification is part of the life of a golf course. We ask how playable were the tees, greens and fairways the last time they played it. Even if it was aerated, the greens are still playable."

"What you are looking at are poor maintenance practices — a lack of irrigation — or, more commonly, too much irrigation — thatchy greens, infestations of poa annua, fairways that are patchy, tees that are beat up, a lot of divots not repaired or filled."

He said a number of panelists will explain in their evaluations why a course was not in good shape — pointing to drought or flood, for instance.

"We do not punish for those cases, but we do hold a course accountable for poor maintenance practices," Whitten said. "Harbour Town [Golf Links on Hilton Head Island, S.C.] got

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Conflict charged

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"I know a lot of the panelists. Most are sincere in their efforts. They are golf people — professionals, superintendents, talented amateurs, managers — and they take what they do for us seriously even though they are not compensated for it. They get absolutely no glory because we don't even print their names any more. There were clubs showering them with invitations, videotapes, etc."

Saying that he gets letters from clubs "all the time," Whitten added: "Not that they're doing anything wrong. No one on paper has offered an illegal inducement. But they do want 30 panelists to visit their clubs so they can get qualified."

SAND GREENS

SAND GREENS

The conditioning judgment call

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in worse and worse shape for several years and began to drop. Pebble Beach [Golf Links in California] began to slide down, then the owners pushed a lot of money into maintenance, and two years ago it went back up to Number 2."

Despite its "craginess," Cypress Point [in Pebble Beach, Calif.] gets good numbers in conditioning "because people understand the nature of that beast," Whitten said. "We're concerned about the areas you are supposed to play. We don't care if rough is dry and brown."

Referring to *Golf Digest's* article "Places To Play 1994-95," Colonial Charter's Staughton said to the magazine's president: "To have someone call my golf course 'a dog track' is obviously taken as a slap in the face. My staff is taken aback, upset, and disgusted by the comments. *Golf Digest* has damaged my integrity and reputation..."

In its brief five-year history Colonial Charters has hosted the Myrtle Beach Open, Myrtle Beach Invitational and Carolinas Open Championship once each; Carolinas Senior Championship three times; and Carolinas Junior/Senior Championship and NCAA Big South Conference Championship four times each. "I hardly think 'a dog track' would be allowed to host the above tournaments," Staughton said.

Whitten said the one thing that concerns him is equating condition with green speed. "A lot of our panelists think if a green Stimps at 12 that's great conditioning. Others think 12 is ridiculous," he said.

Some superintendents complain courses that spend the most for maintenance automatically get higher rankings. "That's one main reason so many modern courses are getting ranked so highly," Doak said.

There probably is some truth to that charge, Whitten admitted. "Eights and 9s go to big-budget courses. Sixes and 7s are excellent for other courses. It's not that these courses have an unfair advantage. They are spending the money to meet the demands of their clientele. The Vintage Club probably is the most immaculately maintained course in the world. I've heard they allocate \$1 million just for flowers. But it fell off the 100 Greatest list. So, if it were simply money spent, Vintage Course would be No. 1.

"There is a check-and-balance." *Golf Digest* panelist and superintendent Terry Buchen, a *Golf Course News* consultant whose Double Eagle Golf Club in Galena, Ohio, Whitten called "micromanaged," said the poll does not put too much stress on conditioning.

"I can see right through things

like aerification," he said. "The big thing I notice is an exaggeration — if a course is well maintained one year and not the next. Most are usually consistent, or they get better. Certainly the top 10 are good consistently. The only time they get worse is because of bad weather."

Buchen said he does take a course's maintenance budget into account, and tries to talk to the superintendent and play the course with him. "He knows more about the course than anyone. I pick his brain about maintenance, membership and

design objectives."

Yet, for all the dispute over rating a course's condition, architect Jeff Brauer of GolfScapes in Arlington, Texas, said: "The truth of it is, the average panelist would be subconsciously including it somewhere... Maintenance is important. But, on the other hand, when I played Royal Melbourne a year ago it wasn't in great condition, but I was able to see its qualities of greatness. You mentally factor in the [au natural] conditioning of courses in Scotland or Australia.

Nicklaus Golf realigns GolfTurf

HONG KONG — GolfTurf, the agronomic wing of Jack Nicklaus Golf Services, is undergoing a personnel shuffle, but rumors of its demise are wrong, according to a company spokesman.

Nicklaus Communications Director Andy O'Brien confirmed Tyge Shields, Jay Sprohl and John Hamilton have left the company. President Ed Etchells, who has been mainly based in the

United States, will take on more international work, O'Brien said. Etchells will also continue to work with courses he has spent a long time with stateside.

John Scott, who has been involved in a number of Asian projects, will oversee most of the domestic work, O'Brien said.

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