

Let's keep new technology accessible



Michael Levans,
editor

News of Toro's alliance with ProShot golf, a provider of GPS technology — the second of the "Big 3" officially on board with this piece of the technological puzzle — is a sure sign that turfgrass maintenance has entered an adventurous age.

The possibilities are limitless, once engineers can make sense of all the elements and somehow put together a cohesive, plug-and-play "solution," or "modular package" — something that's not a whole lot different than the PC you have on your desk. You want to write a letter, you buy Word. You want to do a slide presentation you buy PowerPoint. You want to monitor turf temperature and water saturation...

Pin-point precision spraying, two-way communication between an active piece of equipment and a superintendent's central computer system, maybe even a robotic mowing crew. Some of it's here already, the rest is certainly in the cards.

While suppliers remain sensitive to the idea of supplanting personnel, they are well aware that a robotic mower, even a fleet of mowers, running from a central control is not far fetched — some would even say its within reach.

According to Toro's Dana Lonn, all someone needs to figure out is "collision avoidance."

"That's one of the problems we would like to solve," Lonn told me during a recent interview. "GPS isn't quite accurate enough to get you what you need. We're working on it. It's pretty easy to know where you are, it's pretty easy to know where you want to go. The most difficult part is not running over something. Big objects are easy to find, you don't have to worry about a tree because they don't move, but the small objects, say someone left a golf club on the course, you have to have something that's capable of seeing that."

The solution to collision avoidance will soon be found. But with any technological advance one's left to wonder just how long it will take for it to trickle down to the superintendent's desktop.

Meanwhile, Toro and John Deere are exploring new technologies and new ways of applying them as they get closer to a semi-autonomous vehicle. Both companies will have their new technology ideas in the spotlight at the show. Just how practical is the semi-autonomous vehicle? I'd ask them at the show.

• The NGF numbers are just about official. Another 448 courses have come on line in 1998, with a downright shocking 1,069 new facilities and expansions currently under construction.

I'm going to make a quick prediction: Talk of the alternative facility, The First Tee and other efforts assisting affordable accessible golf are not about to end anytime soon. This is the future of the business.

Golf is pushing toward a greater good

Golf and our society over the last decade have evolved in opposite directions, it seems. The golf industry is an engine driving toward more equality, morality and unity, while society has been steered by politicians and activists toward dissension and immorality.

Ten years ago, Ronald Reagan was president of the United States. The general public felt good about America, its future and its president. The Berlin Wall had fallen and Russia was about to collapse. The U.S. was held in high esteem in most other countries of the world.

In the little world of golf, the industry was peddling along at 200-odd new golf courses each year. Player figures were relatively stagnant. The fiasco over Butler National's white-only policy had not yet surfaced. Generally, golf was treading water.

Ten years ago this month, *Golf Course News* published its first issue and I attended my first International Golf Course Conference and Show. I recall my first two interviews:

- with Alice Dye concerning her efforts to get golf course developers and architects to build "forward" tee boxes to make the game more playable for women, youths and older players; and

- with golf architect Jeffrey Brauer regarding the pros and cons of sodding an entire course, since Tom Fazio was doing just that for the first time at Shadow Creek Golf Club outside Las Vegas.

They seemed innocent-enough interviews, but look at them more closely. It appears now that Alice's push (or was she using a horsewhip?) was a precursor of a mammoth, game-changing trend that has turned into an adventure of innovative, energetic programs and learning facilities to pull youths, women and other beginners into the game of golf.

Though sodding golf courses was unheard-of at the time, Brauer's insights proved true — perhaps even prophetic. The long-term savings related to sodding a course often more than negate the short-term savings related to seeding. But with sodding, a golf course can open quickly and speed up return on investment. Having greatly picked up steam, this method appears to have coincided with the acceptance that, yes, golf can be as much a profitable business as it is a game — a business that can stand without housing, and therefore one that can open to the general public rather than just the wealthy.

Golf as a game, meanwhile, has even gained in stature, perhaps because it stands in stark contrast to the world in which it must exist.

Players abide by the rules, everyone being equal. There are no shades of gray. Here's a novel idea for some of the folks in the White House.

Gamesmanship has to do with a contest of skills, not who can best "spin" the facts to make themselves look good and their enemy evil.

Golf's history is so strongly laced with tales of ethics that they rule — that is, RULE — the game and influence modern players. Compare them to the "ethics" of the world in 1999.

Ten years ago, there existed no Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System for Golf Courses. Today, thousands of golf courses belong to the system, more are being added every month, and builders and architects have labored with environmentalists to forge a set of rules by which they will work with and for ecology. This is a great

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Mark Leslie,
managing editor

GOLF COURSE NEWS

THE NEWSPAPER FOR THE GOLF COURSE INDUSTRY

www.golfcoursenews.com

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GOLF COURSE NEWS

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

On behalf of the entire Renaissance Village team, thank you for the wonderful two articles in your October issue. I must tell you, that of all the coverage we have been fortunate to have had in the past 18 months, you better than anyone captured the essence of Renaissance Village and what we are trying to do.

To have our labor of love be featured in your industry-leading publication is a real boost to our efforts and our credibility. I wanted you to know your reportage has already generated positive feedback and offers of help from several of your subscribers.

We look forward to being in touch with you and *Golf Course News* on the leads you generated as well as subsequent developments surrounding Renaissance Village. We have long recognized that we will not build this project by ourselves, that it will take the combined efforts of literally hundreds of others.

Thank you and your publication for being one of the early believers in us and for your part in getting us to where we are presently — further and faster than I ever dreamed. We look forward to sharing with you and your readers the many successes yet to come.

Father Leo
Rev. Leo F. Armbrust
Renaissance Village Inc.

NOTES FROM THE UK

Time to consider a better women's course

By BRIAN GRIFFITHS

The Marylebone Cricket Club's (MCC) change of heart in admitting women members recently might well lead to an intensification of media interest in the status of women golfers.

In the United Kingdom the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) busybodies have already been poking their noses into the Royal & An-

cient game regarding the status of women at golf clubs.

More women are now taking up golf. Television exposure of major women's events such as the Solheim Cup and the Weetabix Open probably helps to sustain interest — not to mention the Women's Tour team versus the European Seniors Tour match at Praia d'el Ray, Portugal in November 1998.

These, along with other social factors, help to maintain

Brian Griffiths is Chairman of Golf Consult International.

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Griffiths

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the steady growth of the women's game. Unarguably women face constraints in—and upon entering—the game of golf. Their basic facility, the women's course, is too often seriously flawed, the course and the card being carved out from courses which have been designed for men.

Too often women's courses are ill-thought out and lacking the due care required to make them fun to play. Frequently, the women's courses are merely an afterthought. As both old and new courses become necessarily more commercial, the question of the woman golfer takes on a heightened financial significance.

For the first time women golfers are a serious and expanding de-

mand sector that promoters and clubs ignore at their peril—considering that women represent almost 30 percent of all golf demand.

Historically, women have hardly mattered in golf (*Catherine of Aragon, wife of Henry VIII was rebuked for wasting time at golf in 1523*). Such pioneers were a rarity until the turn of this century and the growth of the railways helped the

nascence of the first golf boom, when women began to take seriously to golf and have done so ever since with this trend accelerating in recent years.

Many women's golf clubs played on club and public courses but very few women's clubs controlled their own facility. Even fewer survive. However, two of these survivors are distinguished exceptions: they both own and

manage their courses and celebrated their respective centenaries in the early 1990's.

The handbooks, published to celebrate their centenary years give a fascinating insight into women's golf over the last 100 years. Into the spotlight step: The Wirral Ladies Golf Club (1894); The Formby Ladies Golf Club (1896).

As established women's courses, both are relevant guides for others as we approach the new millennium. Nevertheless, even with purpose built courses, the obstacles for women entering golf are still daunting, just as with anyone else but more so.

Purpose built, one-stop schools with beginner handicap courses where all facets of golf can be learned in order to achieve a handicap card would be a help to all beginners today.

Event courses could not be replicated on club courses because the end result would be too difficult, thus spoiling the all important pleasure element of a round of golf. In the US, there appears to be a preference for women's club course of around 5200 yards, par 72; just 79 yards shorter than the mean of our two centenary courses.

Some recent evidence of the difference between the women's and men's game was highlighted by the tricky negotiations over the 'length allowance' agreed upon at the Praia d'el Rey Cup mentioned earlier.

A difference of 620 yards—34 yards per hole—was adopted. In contrast, the difference between the Solheim and the Weetabix cards and the two centenary courses is 64 yards per hole.

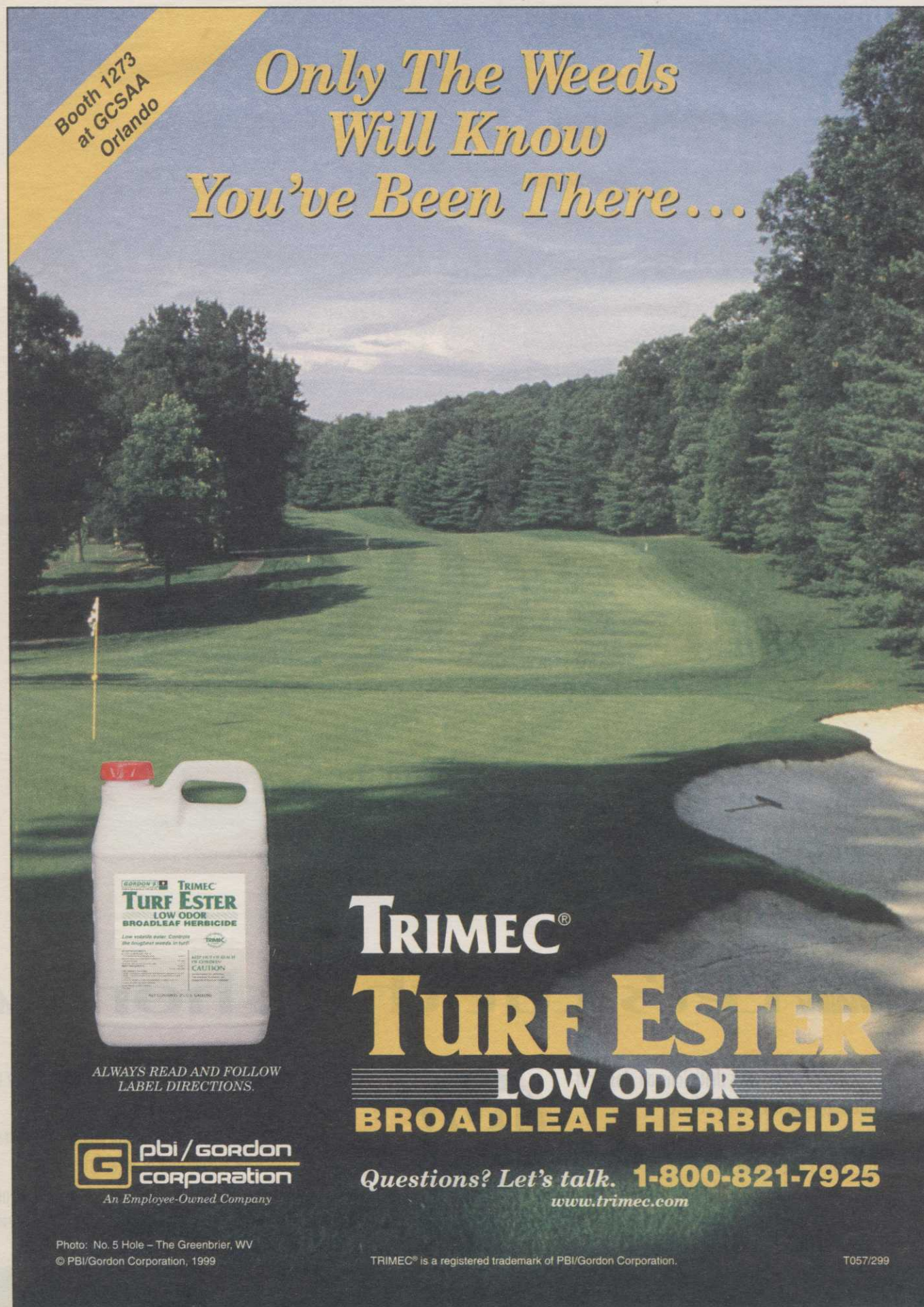
So, what might a fair length allowance be in club events? Against a new average length of 6,000 yards for men's courses in Britain, the calculation throws up the figure of 800 yards.

This 44 yards per hole may be a fair benchmark from which to negotiate prior to club events involving men and women.

Perhaps this insight might encourage women to look critically at their own courses to see whether they can be made more interesting and fun to play, never mind improving the chances of beating up the men.

There is at least a precedent for such a course of action. Some years ago a new project on continental Europe was blessed with a mischievous architect who designed a much easier course for the women than that played by the men. Ever since then the annual matches against the ladies have seen the men getting soundly trounced on almost every occasion.

Although the owner was furious yet helpless, the women members have loved the designer ever since.



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T057/299