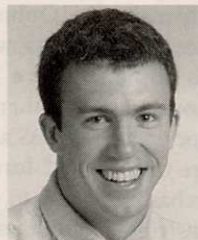


Get real: Set your own speed

Does speed thrill or does speed kill? When it comes to maintaining greens, that is the central question. However, the answer is far from clear-cut.



Andrew Overbeck, editor

When we set out to write about putting green management for this issue, we were surprised at the hornet's nest of emotions that were stirred up when we posed that question to everyone from architects to superintendents.

The issue is so thorny we went through more industry insiders trying to get someone to weigh in on the side of speed than a porcupine has quills. In our GCN Newspoll, nearly 65 percent of respondents said increased green speed was bad for the game of golf.

Why, then, are superintendents continually lowering cutting heights and pushing their turf to the limit to get faster and faster greens when many of them don't believe in it? Because golfers and members demand them, that's why. As Kevin Ross notes in his story this month, mowing greens at 3/16 inch will get superintendents a pink slip these days (see story on page 8). Fast is fun and like rock n' roll,

its here to stay.

Many blame NBC announcer Johnny Miller for calling greens that are Stimping at 12 feet slow. Heck, pin it on Augusta National for maintaining unrealistically slick greens. That's

the reason members are quipping, "Green is good, but fast is better," and "I'd rather putt on fast dirt than slow greens," right?

Speed has clearly gotten out of control if superintendents are going low just to keep their jobs. But as we discovered in our reporting this month, it's not too late for superintendents to take control of speed and use the Stimpmeter to their advantage.

As Ross points out in his story, technological advances have made faster greens possible, but how low can you go? One way to escape the cutting height limbo is to take the Stimpmeter out of the closet (or buy one already) and use the damn thing. Follow the lead of Mike Morris at Crystal Downs (see story on page 1) and determine the optimum

green speed for your particular course. By maintaining a range of green speeds day in and day out, Morris has eliminated complaints from members and come up with

done. It will take more than a scolding editorial to affect change. Golfers need to have their perspectives altered for them. Michigan State University's Thom Nikolai is working on research that may do just that (see story on page 10). Under his proposal, we would no longer describe greens



a realistic maintenance plan.

By keeping his greens within the optimum range, Morris has also gotten off the cutting height roller coaster. He no longer has to speed up greens for the member-guest and then field complaints from members when he goes back to maintaining "normal" conditions.

I know this is easier said than

in terms of speed, but in terms of contour. Fast, medium and slow would be replaced with flat, undulating and severely contoured.

This change in thinking would take the pressure off everyone from architects to superintendents and give golfers a healthier perspective on the game. If we could only apply rational thinking to the distance debate...

POINT

Speed doesn't have to kill

By JON SCOTT

Speed kills, right? At least that has been the mantra of superintendents and agronomists ever since courses started using the Stimpmeter to gain bragging rights at the 19th hole rather than to get consistency in putting quality from green to green on the same golf course. At the risk of losing friends and getting hate mail, I'm going to stick my neck out and say speed does not necessarily kill.

Today we have at our disposal the means to grow and mow greens at heights and stress levels that would have made the greenkeepers of old go into early retirement. Superintendents do this as a matter of daily routine without giving it a second thought.

What sacrilegious tripe are you throwing about here, Mr. Scott? I'm trying to say that everything is relative, and at different times in the history of golf course maintenance, there have been breakthroughs that have allowed for faster greens without sacrificing turf health.

When I started growing and killing grass over 30 years ago, my 328 bermuda greens were mowed at a whopping 5/16 inch. On special occasions, I dared to go down to 1/4 inch, but only for short periods. Green speed, if you could call it that, was probably somewhere between four and five feet, but we didn't measure it that way; we just tossed the ball toward the hole and watched where it stopped. Some of the greens were so steeply sloped that the ball didn't stop, and you had to get your driver out to putt it back uphill. This was golf in 1972.

Why didn't we stay at 1/4 inch? Because a few superintendents dared to trim their 328 down to 5/32 inch with the new nine-blade reels and the golfers loved it. This drove a demand for a turfgrass that would hold



Jon Scott

Continued on next page

COUNTERPOINT

Speed is not good for game

By MIKE DEVRIES

Contrary to the desires of many contemporary golfers, blistering green speeds do not increase the enjoyment we derive from the game. In fact, super-fast greens actually reduce options for attacking the hole, making golf less interesting and also, in many instances, unnecessarily difficult.

Don't get me wrong, fast greens can be fun when they force golfers to make a longer comeback putt after misjudging the first, but if players are consistently in fear of the ball rolling off the green, then things are out of hand.

Green speeds frequently become a problem on older courses when the greens are resurfaced with new varieties of bentgrass that demand shorter cutting heights in order to survive. Many greens designed and constructed during the pre-World War II era, when today's putting speeds were unfathomable, tend to feature steep slopes and bold contours. In many cases, when those original features are retained, the new turf cover has made such greens unplayable, which has, in turn, led many clubs and course owners to rebuild putting surfaces on a flatter pitch. As a result, the original, unique character of many older greens has been lost, simply to accommodate faster putting speeds.

In 1928, pioneer golf architect Charles Blair MacDonald, designer of the National Golf Links of America, wrote: "Putting greens to a golf course are what the face is to a portrait... the face tells the story and determines the character and quality of the portrait - whether it is good or bad." MacDonald's wisdom still applies today. Interesting greens are enjoyed by all classes of golfers. And, perhaps more importantly, such greens make each individual course distinctive.



Mike DeVries

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