

MAKING IT FAST AND F

Ron Bivens, golf course superintendent at the private Country Club of Salisbury in North Carolina, often gets pulled aside by members telling him they were hitting a 150-yard shot on a green during the spring and they're hitting a 170-yard shot after the same drive during the summer and wonder why.

"They don't understand the firmness they had on the fairways changes with the season and grass conditions," Bivens says. "I'm always educating members about what we do with greens and fairways."

Such is part of the life of a golf course superintendent. In short, members want and expect only the best course conditions any time of year. It might be a generalization, but it's safe to say private club members want the conditions of their courses fast and firm, while those at daily-fee facilities prefer less-severe playing conditions. Where greens at a private club might be rolling 11 and above on average, the normal Stimpmeter reading for a daily-fee facility is around nine.

"I don't think there's any question that members at private clubs want their greens firm and fast," Bivens says. "We can get them running 12 and even 13 if we want."

Jeff Shafer, golf course manager at the municipally-owned Las Positas Golf Course in Livermore, Calif., says greens there generally are 9.5, and are 10.5 at various times of the year.

"We think that's a good speed for a municipal course," Shafer says.

At Aberdeen Country Club, a resort course in North Myrtle Beach, S.C., golf course superintendent Dan Connolly tries to keep green speed at 9.5, and everyone seems pleased with that.

"Why would I want to keep them faster for first timers?" he asks. "With the undulation we have on our greens, I would have people four- and five-putting. They would never come back."

USGA INPUT

The U.S. Golf Association issues no guidelines for green speeds but discourages superintendents from going to extremes to make their putting surfaces as fast as marble countertops, says James Snow, national director of the USGA Green Section.

"If you make your greens too fast, you'll discourage mid- and high-handicappers from playing your golf course," he says. "And while the better player likes a tight lie in the fairway and firm ground for more roll on drives, older players, especially ladies, want a little more of a fluffy lie."



BY JOHN TORSIELLO

IRM

Superintendents strive to strike a balance between golfers' preferences and healthy turf conditions that are best for the bottom line



At the OGA Golf Course in Woodburn, Ore., golf course superintendent Ryan Wyckoff communicates with golfers to find out how the course is playing. Photo: OGA Golf Course



At Aberdeen Country Club, golf course superintendent Dan Connolly maintains green speed at 9.5, and he says most golfers seem to be happy with that. Photo: Aberdeen Country Club

“And there’s always a worry that by keeping the grass too tight you’ll stress out the turf and wind up losing parts of the course,” Snow adds.

The U.S. Open, which the USGA operates, is notorious for fast and firm playing conditions. But Snow says even a course set up for an Open must have its conditions carefully analyzed and then managed properly to avoid presenting unfair playing conditions.

“I wasn’t there, but I believe the greens at Winged Foot (site of the 2006 U.S. Open in Mamaroneck, N.Y.) were no more than 10.5 on the Stimpmeter,” he says. “If you went beyond that, some of those greens would be impossible to putt on because of their slope and undulation. Again, I wasn’t there, but I have heard greens running a 14. But that was on relatively flat surfaces with little undulation.”

GOLFERS’ IMPACT

With green speeds, there’s always a trade-off, even at private clubs. Skilled players love being tested by firm and fast putting surfaces, while less accomplished players want slower greens that allow them to be more aggressive on putts.

“There’s a lot of difference between a two handicap and a 22,” Connolly says. “A scratch player wants the greens 11 or higher, and a 77-year-old lady who’s barely getting around

wants them at 7.5.”

Green speed and firmness is always course specific, says Ryan Wyckoff, golf course superintendent at the OGA Golf Course in Woodburn, Ore.

“A superintendent has to take into consideration the caliber of golfer playing his or her course,” he says. “Usually, private clubs have very strong players, and their expectations are firmer and faster conditions through the green. Public courses have lesser caliber golfers who would be better served with slower greens and a little higher-cut fairway grass.”

Wyckoff, who has worked on grounds crews at several U.S. Opens, believes superintendents need to be proactive and seek input from the customer.

“I always try and communicate with golfers to find out how the course is playing and get their feedback,” he says. “And you need to communicate with the guys in the pro shop. A lot of times they’ll get more feedback directly from golfers when they check in or pass through on their way out the door.”

Bivens says there should always be an education process going on between the superintendent, his staff and the members about

the whys of playing conditions.

“We try to educate our members through our newsletter and various committees, telling them why course conditions change from season to season,” he says.

THE AGRONOMIC ASPECT

Mother Nature plays a role in course setup and conditions, too. For example, Bermudagrass fairways on courses in the South will roll faster in spring because a thatch layer has yet to build up. During summer, even though the grass might be being cut the same height as in the spring, the fairways will build up thatch, become thicker and offer less bounce and roll. Thus, the reason for a 150-yard shot in April becoming a 170-yard shot in July.

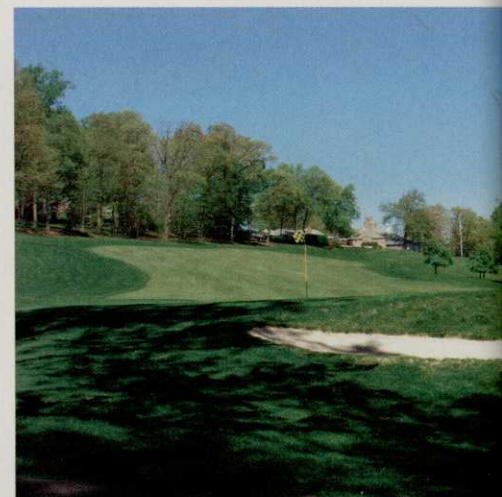
Fast and firm at Berry Hill Country Club in Charleston, W.Va., means golf course superintendent John Cummings and his staff do what they can to maintain conditions so at no time the ball plugs through the greens, Cummings says.

“This is, of course, assuming Mother Nature cooperates,” he says.

Cummings says fast and firm conditions can best be achieved through the amount of water the turf receives.

“We don’t overwater and irrigate only enough to keep the turf from stressing out to

At Huntingdon Valley Country Club, playing conditions are more important than turfgrass color. Photo: Huntingdon Valley Country Club



Dan Connolly says there are concerns about keeping grass low and dry because it opens the door for pathogenic attacks. Photo: Aberdeen Country Club

the point of death or nonrecovery from the heat and wear and tear of the day's play," he says. "As for greens, it means to mow, roll and topdress depending on the growth rate of the turf to keep the greens smooth, consistent, quick but healthy, with good dense canopies. A properly hit shot should allow the ball to release and advance toward the hole."

Green speed also can be controlled by spot watering, rolling and double cutting, says P.J. Ringenberger, golf course superintendent at Green Valley Ranch Golf Club in Denver.

"You can even use a vibratory roller and spot roll right around a hole placement for additional speed," he says.

To create firm fairways, more superintendents are topdressing with sand, which helps break down organic matter and allows greater air and water circulation to keep the turf firmer, Connolly says.

"A good golfer will always like firmer fairway conditions, so the ball doesn't plug and sits up nicely," Shafer says. "You create that by not watering as much and having fairways with proper drainage so water isn't sitting and softening the turf."

"We have found with our comment cards that golfers enjoy firm, dry and fast conditions, and their scores have reflected that," he adds.

BE CAREFUL

But maintaining fast and firm playing conditions can place a strain on a superintendent's budget and manpower.

"Any superintendent with basic skills can do anything he wants with the firmness and speed of fairways and greens," Connolly says. "We can double and triple cut, roll, topdress, treat the greens with growth retardants and groom every day. Private clubs that have big budgets can do this. Usually municipal and privately owned public courses don't have the type of budgets that allow for such maintenance."

But Connolly says there are concerns about



stressing the turf by keeping the grass low and dry. It opens the door for pathogenic attack and can weaken the plant in which it becomes less resistant to stress.

If one wants firm and fast conditions, that person will have to stay on top of things, Ringenberger says. If a course is set up for a tournament and the greens are dry and fast, the turf can take a hit if the weather is really hot. If that's the case, spot watering is needed so the turf doesn't stress out.

Maintaining fast and firm greens also can limit the number of pin placements a green can have.

"If we have the greens rolling 11 or 12 most times of the year, that means we lose in placements, especially on the edges of greens," Bivens says. "But when we drop down to a nine during July and August – when the weather is too hot to keep them running faster – it opens up all sorts of new pin placements on higher levels of the greens and around the edges. This way the members still can have greens that appear to be faster than they really are."

CONDITIONS OVER COLOR

Scott Anderson, superintendent at Huntingdon Valley (Pa.) Country Club, has taken a unique approach to course maintenance. He

considers himself a playing conditions manager more than a turf manager.

"We have placed playing conditions above color," he says. "The soil-based greens seem to allow for a lot of resiliency in achieving firm and fast playing conditions, even on extremely hot days. The turf will turn brown at certain times of the year but the playing conditions are always the focus. The grass has been conditioned over time with a survival of the fittest approach. Our organic and minimalist base program keeps costs down."

The reaction from members has been positive, Anderson says.

Knowing a course inside and out is crucial to maintaining consistent playing conditions, Bivens says.

"You have to know each individual green and understand the little things, like how much sunlight it gets, when the sun hits it and its undulation, and treat it accordingly if you want to be consistent," he says. "It's all about having a balance in playing conditions from hole to hole. That's what members want no matter what the speed is." GCI

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