



## WE PLAY GOLF, THEY PLAY PERFECT

The calendar year is almost done, the “race to the FedEx Cup” is over, and it recently occurred to me that for the past 12 months I have seen nothing but perfect courses being attacked by the world’s best players. Is this really golf?

Think about it. The pros travel with entourages that include personal trainers, chefs, swing coaches, mental gurus, and a convoy of club and ball manufacturers who regularly tweak and refine the equipment that these golfers use. Their every request is answered, every wish fulfilled.

While it gives me hope that I might one day hit just one shot as purely as they strike nearly every one, their skill and privilege cause me to pause and consider: Is this really golf? Could the game’s finest actually play on the same types of courses and under the same conditions you and I face each and every round?

If you tuned in any week of the year, be it the smallest-market event or one of the majors or the Ryder Cup, you were witness to the results of heroic efforts put forth by superintendents and crews who were able to create excellent playing conditions. Not a week went by that we didn’t see – and they didn’t play – perfect conditions (weather permitting, and even then, a challenged course was given time to heal while the golfers were able to repair to the dry, warm comfort of a locker room).

I see these phenomenal players and perfect courses and I’m motivated to get out there and play myself. But what I have come to realize is that while they may be playing perfect golf, it is not real golf.

When I head out to play on any given day I have almost no idea what conditions I’ll find. That applies to green speeds, bunker conditions, height-of-cut, rough (or not), mowing

patterns – you name it. I’m lucky enough to travel across the country consulting, giving speeches, meeting with superintendents and others and, of course, playing. When I head out to a course whether it’s in Los Angeles or Lincoln, from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Ore., I know I’m going to encounter a wide range of conditions, grasses, set-up philosophies, and putting greens. It’s part of my personal challenge, and in all honesty, part of the fun. As a result, I never complain because I understand the difficulties that every superintendent has to deal with. Furthermore, I’m happy just to be out playing.

Superintendents, in particular, shouldn’t put so much pressure on themselves, and their crews to create **superhuman conditions**.

You think today’s PGA Tour player likes going from bent grass to Bermuda, from fluffy white sand to coarser darker grit, from one length of rough to another? Not really. Do you think that same pro could handle the conditions that we real golfers experience from week to week?

Not a chance.

They putt well because the greens are the same speed, week after week. Yes, they face rare exceptions such as at the two Opens or the Masters. But, what if they – like we – encountered different green speeds from hole to hole on the same course? You’d witness a nuclear meltdown right then and there.

I had the honor of working for Byron Nelson in the 1980s building Las Colinas Sports Club outside of Dallas. I remember him saying how impressed he was by the consistency of conditions the players faced week in and week out. That was in 1983.

Mr. Nelson said that in his day players would hit into bunkers on purpose because sand was more predictable than the green surrounds. He said that just a few feet off the green you could end up in anything “from a gopher hole to a tree root.”

Players today still hit into bunkers, but that’s because they find the sand explosion one of the easiest shots in golf.

On some of the courses I’ve played, neither the bunkers nor the green complexes are good. Get in the sand and I might find rakes, rocks, footprints, cigar butts, and everything except smoothly, properly raked

powder. A member of a private club recently said to me, in all seriousness, “I thought those rakes were for the grounds crew to use!”

Yet, despite the radically improved conditions (to say nothing of equipment), the scoring average on the PGA Tour has barely dropped. In 1945, Mr. Nelson’s scoring average was 68.34; in 2000, Tiger Woods averaged 68.17.

What else does the Tour player find? Teeing grounds are perfectly mown, level, and striped, plus the stripes point directly where the ball is supposed to go. Most “real” courses favor the philosophy espoused by Pete Dye, who used to aim tees wherever he wanted and say, “Let the golfer figure it out.”

What do I find? Different grass types hole to hole; varying soil firmness from fairways to approaches to putting greens to bunkers. The

(continued on page 79)

offset any negative effects of the finer sand, presuming that negative effects actually occur.

**RESEARCH AT RUTGERS.** Two research trials were recently initiated at Rutgers University to evaluate the effects of topdressing sand varying in particle size distribution on turfgrass quality and surface firmness. Our trials compare the use of coarse medium and medium-fine sands on turfs with different thatching tendencies.

Our first field trial was initiated in



The goals of a topdressing program are to manage the organic debris.

2010 on Greenwich velvet bentgrass putting green turf, which has a great thatching tendency. The plots were mowed daily at 0.11 inch with a triplex mower. Irrigation was applied to these plots but only enough to relieve the initial signs of wilt stress, which serves as the indicator to apply water. Either coarse-medium or medium-fine sand was applied every two weeks at 50 or 100 pounds per 1,000 square feet. The plots were evaluated for turf quality, turf color, sand presence, digital image analysis, post-topdressing clipping collection, volumetric water content (0- to 1.5-inch depth), and surface hardness (Clegg Impact Soil Tester [2.25 and 0.5 kg] and USGA TruFirm).

Substantial differences in firmness or quality were not apparent during 2010; however, all topdressing treatments displayed better turfgrass quality than the non-topdressed check plots by early June 2011. By the end of June 2011, a topdressing rate effect was observed. Plots topdressed at 100 pounds per 1,000 square feet had better turfgrass quality than plots top-

dressed at 50 pounds per 1,000 square feet. Additionally, the medium fine sand started to produce better turf quality than the coarse-medium sand during 2011. It was also becoming more evident as the study continued that topdressing sand needed to be applied at the rate of 100 pounds per 1,000 square feet to observe differences between these two sand sizes.

The amount of sand left on the turf surface after topdressing events was different among the sands. As expected, it took more time for the turf surface to become clear of sand when topdressing was done with the coarse medium sand topdressing or at the rate of 100 pounds per 1,000 square feet. Additionally, the amount of sand harvested during mowing was affected the sand was reduced, less sand was removed by mowing. The critical issue that must be evaluated is, will the use of a finer topdressing sand applied over coarser-textured soils have any long-term ramifications? Will infiltration be affected negatively, and/or will free drainage within the profile be unaffected? These issues will be evaluated as research continues.

A second field trial was initiated in late June 2011 on annual bluegrass putting green turf. Three sand sizes are being used in this trial: a medium coarse sand, a medium sand (the medium-coarse sand sieved to remove coarse sand with a #35 sieve, 500- $\mu$ m screen), and a medium-fine sand. Topdressing was applied at 50 pounds per 1,000 square feet every 14 days during the summer months. Data collection in this trial was similar to the velvet bentgrass trial. Additionally, anthracnose severity was evaluated every seven to 10 days.

All topdressing treatments had as good or better turfgrass quality than the non-topdressed plots. As expected, more anthracnose disease was observed on the non-topdressed plots compared to all of the plots receiving topdressing sand. No differences among sand sizes were observed in the first year of this trial. **GCI**

(MORGAHAN continued from page 12)

putting greens might be mown three times a week – if I'm lucky.

I wish someone would hold up a "Quiet Please" sign when I was getting ready to swing. Every hiccup drives the pros crazy, to say nothing of planes flying overhead (or even more ridiculous, the blimp!), the ring of a cell phone (owned by a spectator, who has paid for the opportunity of getting in to watch the tournament), the click of a camera in the hands of a fan.

At a recent LPGA event, a lone spectator was walking behind the green 85 yards away, totally flustering the player, causing her to back off her shot and start her four-minute pre-swing routine all over again. Can you imagine her in my group? She'd have to put up with me and my partners passing wind (on purpose), gabbing on the cell phone, and the squeal of cart breaks three feet from the tee. I get that I'm not playing for a million dollars, but come on...

I guess one privilege of being really, really good is that you don't have to deal with everyday annoyances and inconsistencies. But really: Aren't they part of the challenge and the fun?

Before superintendents and the rest of management go crazy trying to replicate the perfect golf experience for Mr. and Mrs. Average Golfer, they should think about expectations. Do I want the perfect triangle stack of Pro-V1s, my name on a range sign, and ropes separating me from the riff-raff? Sure. But do I expect it? Do I need it? Am I willing to pay for it? No. And will it truly improve the experience? Not enough to make it worth anyone's while to provide it. Not in this economy.

Superintendents, in particular, should not put so much pressure on themselves, and their crews to create superhuman conditions. There are acceptable limits, levels of quality that will make us more than happy. Most people playing on most courses not only aren't elite golfers, they would not know what to do if they did encounter perfect. It would probably make them too nervous to take a divot.

I'm not saying "real" courses – public and private – should abandon their standards and dumb-down their service and conditioning. But they should be realistic about their audience and their budgets. Spend where it makes sense, provide the best possible experience, do the most they can to move people around and let them have fun. We're not playing "perfect" and should not expect to.

As a very accomplished PGA Tour player once told me as I was fuming over a poorly hit shot, "Tim, you're not good enough to get mad!" **GCI**