

## Off The Fringe

# Perc Test Needs Evaluation

### MILLER WORKING WITH USGA TO STANDARDIZE LAB TESTING

**A**mid charges of politics and loose methodology among soil testing labs, the USGA believes it's on the verge of a breakthrough to standardize testing methods and put an end to six years of tepid relations between labs and golf course contractors, builders and soil blenders.

"I'd love to put out a new method — and verify its strengths and correct its weaknesses for several months — and then release a final version by the first of the year," said Bob Miller, an affiliate professor at Colorado State University, who's working for the USGA to standardize testing methods among the country's labs.

The USGA has agreed to share costs with the labs if they need retooling. "While the labs' analysis for organic matter and soil chemicals are 'rock solid,' the bad news is the saturated hydraulic conductivity [percolation] test [is not]," Miller said.

The problem is the test method itself — the way it is written has signifi-

cant weaknesses, Miller noted. "No two labs are on the same page or in the same book," he said.

Indeed, the "perc test," as it is called, is the most important of all the analysis measures. The test determines how many inches per hour of water percolates through the root zone beneath a golf course green.

At the summer meeting of the Golf Course Builders Association of America (GCBA), the importance of the perc test was driven home.

Miller said: "One of the builders said to me, 'I produce X thousand tons of material on my construction projects each year. If a lab can tell me that a 90-10 (sand-to-peat) blend works better than 85-15, I can write off several million dollars in construction costs.'"

Therein lies part of the rub. Labs feel that if they tighten up their tolerances, they will lose customers, critics of the test say. So they widen the tolerances and lean up the mixture by using less peat.

"This was the dirty little secret of the industry," Miller said. "When a supplier sends a sample to the lab, he

sends a good sample. If he doesn't like the numbers he gets, he sends it to another lab."

Eight soil testing labs are now accredited through the American Association of Laboratory Accreditation, but Miller said "accreditation is empty unless you test for peoples' performance." Some labs have chosen not to seek accreditation, which costs \$25,000 to \$30,000 every three years.

The fact that soil testing labs use different equipment is not the primary problem, according to Miller, who holds a Ph.D. in soil science and for 10 years ran a lab at University of California-Davis.

"That is a misconception," he said. "If I ranked the top three problems, equipment would be third. Technique is the operative problem."

To correct the situation, Miller and the USGA are taking steps to make the process less sophisticated, but codify the steps more rigidly.

"The bottom line is that we use a robust method, which means anyone can do it and get the same numbers," Miller said, "If we get less than 5 percent to 7 percent difference [from lab to lab], that's fine with me."

— Mark Leslie

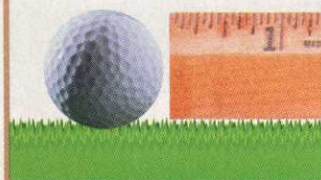
### Calling the Shots

Gimmie!  
Gimmie!

Is close enough good enough, or should you have to go the "hole" way?

Concede: **63.9%**

Make 'em putt: **36.1%**



HEY!  
Mulligan  
Mulligan



When you end up in the drink, should you get another shot?

Yes  
**36.2%**  
No  
**63.8%**

SOURCE: NATIONAL GOLF FOUNDATION  
ILLUSTRATION: DAN BEEDY

## A Look Back

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The head superintendent jobs are available. It just takes a little longer to get there, which is probably a good thing considering the on-the-job training most young superintendents acquire before attaining top posts.

Superintendents have also upgraded their image. The battle to get others to call them superintendents, rather than greenkeepers, was still being fought 10 years ago. But with the new titles come new responsibilities, including budgeting, government regulations and personnel management issues. While enjoying their new responsibilities, many superintendents seem to miss the time spent outdoors, which is what attracted them to the profession in the first place.

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