

Tread Lightly

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Alternative spikes
have relieved courses
from the heavy damage
of traditional metals, but
new cleat designs have
some superintendents
concerned

Walter Montross remembers the day when his club banned metal golf spikes. It was four years ago, and he says it revolutionized the way he cares for his greens.

Montross, superintendent at Westwood CC in Vienna, Va., says metal-spiked golf shoes damaged his greens daily. By the time the last groups hit the course for their early evening rounds, the greens were virtually unputtable. But Montross says alternative spikes have changed all that.

"After four years of using alternative

spikes, my members would hang anyone who came in here with metal spikes," Montross says. "Since the changes, I can now almost guarantee that I will have the same putting surface at the end of the day that I have in the morning."

But all is not perfect. While no one has applauded the advent of alternative spikes more than superintendents, concerns are growing that alternative spikes may be taking a step backwards in the name of increasing traction — and some superintendents worry that all the gains they have made could be lost.



SOFTSPIKES

Developed to protect turf

Alternative spikes were developed in 1992 in Boise, Idaho, when a winter metal spike ban was endorsed by several Western golf associations. Golfers wanted to play, but the courses wouldn't let them unless they wore shoes without metal spikes. A Boise inventor named Faris McMullin wanted to help golfers continue playing in the winter months, so he created a removable alternative spike made from plastic. From that invention, the original Softspikes brand evolved.

"People could see the difference in damage almost immediately," says Kelly Elbin, vice president of communications for Softspikes, the Gaithersburg, Md., company that pioneered the spikes. "You aren't left with the little hills made by metal spikes."

More than 9,000 U.S. courses have banned metal spikes, according to Elbin — so many, in fact, that the company doesn't bother keeping track anymore. Other companies, such as Etonic and Nike, have all but eliminated metal spikes from their shoe lines, and Softspikes has an exclusive contract with Footjoy to provide it with alternative spikes for its shoes. "Alternative spikes are quickly becoming the standard across the industry," Elbin says.

Corey Eastwood, CGCS at Stockton Golf & CC in Stockton, Calif., says there's no reason golfers need spikes at all — alternative spikes or otherwise. Still, alternative spikes are better than metals, and he notes that 50 percent of professionals have switched to alternative spikes. He hopes that as more professionals use them, average golfers will follow suit.

"I don't know why golfers need spikes of any kind," Eastwood says. "In most cases, shoes with soft soles or tennis shoes are just as good."

Traction concerns

Rick Tatum, director of golf operations at Shadow Wood CC in Bonita Springs, Fla., says some superintendents might have questions about the traction capabilities of alternative

spikes, particularly those who have many wooden bridges on their courses — alternative spikes don't grip wood well. But he adds that there are traction control devices that can counteract potential slips and falls.

"The only people still wearing metal spikes are the professionals," Tatum

says. "Metal spikes remain an advantage only for those who understand how to take advantage of the added traction. Right now, that applies to only a handful of pros and not to most weekend golfers."

Concerns about traction have dogged
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Why Black Widows Won't Kill Your Greens

Golfdom asked Jon Hyman, Softspikes' CEO, to address the concerns some superintendents have about the company's new Black Widow spikes:

1) How do Black Widow cleats by Softspikes differ from the company's other offerings?

The Black Widow's trademark dynamic cleat technology (DCT) allows the legs of the Black Widow to flex or move with every step a golfer takes, which makes the spikes green-friendly.

2) How do you respond to some superintendents' concerns that Black Widows represent a shift back to the aggressiveness of metal spikes?

When we heard late last year that certain courses were having [problems] with the Black Widow, we polled our customers to see if there was a real issue. We formed an advisory board of some of the most respected superintendents in the country to test the product and give us their feed-

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Smooth Transitions During Overseeding And Spring Greenup

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alternative spikes from the beginning. According to Elbin, courses were afraid that golfers using the new cleats would injure themselves while playing and would hold clubs responsible.

Those fears have proved largely unfounded, according to Gary Christ, a sports and entertainment lawyer in Palm Beach Court, Fla. He says that when alternative spikes came on the market, he strongly advised courses against banning metal spikes completely because of potential lawsuits. But in the seven years since alternative spikes were introduced, Christ's concerns have diminished.

"The onslaught of cases that everyone expected hasn't materialized," says Christ, who is also general counsel for the National Golf Foundation. "I'm sure there have been a few slip-and-fall type lawsuits, but not too many. Besides, as the technology has evolved, the traction has improved."

But most agree that alternative spikes still don't offer the same traction as metals — and therein lies the rub. In an effort to answer traction concerns, Softspikes introduced Black Widows 18 months ago. Elbin says Black Widows provide better traction than other alternative spikes (see sidebar), but some superintendents, including Montross, worry that the new spikes may also tear up turf the way their metal forebearers did.

"When the new spikes came out, my greens committee chairman asked me if I wanted to ban them," Montross says. "I didn't, but that doesn't mean I'm not concerned that this move might start a trend. I'm taking a wait-and-see attitude."

Elbin noted that Softspikes heard concerns like Montross' and re-evaluated the Black Widow design. The company changed it to make it more greens-friendly and re-released the spikes at the GCSAA show in February. The response from superintendents has been good, he says. "We will always be concerned about what superintendents think of our product and will work to allay any concerns they might have," Elbin says. ■

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back. Our research showed no significant effect on greens from the Black Widow, but we did see that it could be an issue under certain conditions. So we developed a more pliable material for the Black Widow that still provided the same level of performance and comfort, but improved the greens friendliness of the product. We introduced the revised Black Widow at February's GCSAA show, then mailed a complete set to every superintendent who signed up at the show.

Since that time, we've grown our list of accounts. For example, ClubLink Corp, the largest owner, operator and developer of golf courses in Canada, recently announced a two-year exclusive agreement with Softspikes to carry only our brand cleats. This represents a major shift for ClubLink, which last fall announced it would not permit the use of the Black Widow cleat at any of its courses.



SOFTSPIKES

Black Widow spikes have raised damage concerns for some superintendents.

3) Do you have plans to market these spikes more aggressively so you can answer some of these concerns?

From day one, superintendents have been our top allies. They have helped position Softspikes as the market leader in a category that has brought so many positive changes to their profession. We will do everything we can, at the national and local levels, to make sure we educate superintendents that our designs are good for the game.

Superior Color Retention Under Cool Conditions

Once temperatures dip into the mid-to-low 40's, Tifdwarf experiences chlorophyll loss and goes off-color quite rapidly. So do some of the superdwarfs. Not TifEagle. It holds up to cool weather conditions extremely well. TifEagle will also go off-color when temperatures get down in the low 30's, but it has a much faster, more robust recovery than other grasses. Obviously, good color retention is aesthetically pleasing, but it's also an indication that your grass is still generating good leaf production. This is quite important for superintendents who choose not to overseed. It's equally important for late season play during the fall transition.

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