Building the (Im)perfect Golf Course

BY JIM CONNOLLY

We need more tracks with slow greens and bunkers that yield fried-egg lies

The demand for perfect greens, bunkers and carpet-like turf is a daily challenge for superintendents. They know they can deliver these playing conditions occasionally, but factors out of their control do not allow for this high level of management year-round.

There's no doubt that ultra-fast greens and manicured conditions can be accomplished for professional golf events and special tournaments. But does this type of golf course really make it more challenging? I've always believed that the way the course is maintained has more impact upon the game than any development in equipment, design or player skill. The ways courses are maintained today have helped to lower scores for tour players.

It has been more than six years since I was a USGA agronomist. Back then, putting green speed was often the hot topic as golfers expressed their desire for better (faster) greens. It was the belief of many green committees and those involved in tournament preparation that fast greens prevent low scores that make courses look easy — and low scores would embarrass club officials and members.

I've always preached against cutting bentgrass below 5/32 of an inch, frequent rolling and the intense management needed to achieve unrealistic green speed. Yet the quest for perfect turf continues. Recently, the green-speed issue was brought to my attention again while I visited a course where members requested that Stimpmeter green speeds be posted each morning on the first tee. This ridiculous and nonsensical request sparked me to preach again about the evils of fast greens and perfect conditions.

Golf maintenance practices are seldom discussed during televised tournaments, save the few passing comments about general turf conditions. Viewers would rather hear how the titanium liquid-balanced ball and the mass-inertia energy-transfer shaft can improve their games.

Maybe most golfers don't care about grass, but they should. They should also care about bunkers. The way grass and bunkers are maintained (mowed, rolled and raked) has a big effect on scores at the professional level and, to a lesser extent, at the amateur level.

According to the PGA Tour, the average number of putts per round by the top 10 golfers decreased one stroke in the last 20 years from 28.96 in 1980 to 27.96 in 1999.

Either golfers are better putters or the surface is getting easier to putt. Let's start with the surface, which has been improving for some time. Greens are much truer than 20 years ago, and golfers can thank superintendents for that.

A flawless green with a smooth, predictable putting surface offers the best chance of getting the ball in the hole. Advancements in mowing equipment, motorized rollers, the increase in maintenance dollars, and, of course, skilled superintendents make his possible.

However, golfers' putting skills can't be overlooked, and today's pros have every resource available for improving them. Their motivation to succeed is obvious because they play for millions of dollars and high-profile exposure.

Still, the condition of the golf course plays a bigger part than given credit.

Let's look at total scoring. In 1980, the average score on the Tour was 70.63, compared to 69.39 in 1999. The difference is 1.24.

Considering that scoring average has dropped 1.24 strokes over the last 20 years and putting scores have dropped one stroke per round, it can be assumed that 81 percent of improvement is in putting.

Let's study sand saves from greenside bunkers. In 1980, sand saves were 56.13 percent. They improved to 65.48 percent in 1999, a whopping 9.35 percent.

A bunker is barely a hazard for today's pros. Bunker maintenance today is designed to make sure that sand is a uniform 4-inch depth and firm to avoid the unpopular fried-egg lie. But what's wrong with the occasional fried egg? Approach shots that miss the green from a short distance should occasionally plug.

Driving distance has improved 15.79 yards since 1980 to an average of 286.49 yards in 1999. I'll leave the equipment improvement debate to the USGA. Golfers are stronger, healthier and hit the ball further. However, they are only slightly more accurate than golfers of the past, improving just 2.46 percent in fairways hit over the last 20 years.

There's not much change in greens hit in regulation. In 1980, 70.44 percent of greens were hit, compared to 71.08 in 1999. Some say pros are hitting closer to the hole because they're 16 yards closer to greens and hitting from perfect fairways. That may be true, but I say that most of the improvement to scoring is realized on greens and bunkers.

Interestingly, greens and bunkers happen to be the two areas of maintenance that superintendents receive the most criticism from golfers and TV commentators. Superintendents have responded wisely, for the sake of job security, and given golfers what they want. Scores are lower because of these refinements.

But are fast greens always better than slow greens? Excluding the job security issue, no. The Stimpmeter has become our thermometer of healthy and sick, good and bad. Somewhere in the last 25 years, fast greens have become synonymous with good greens.

MIKE KLEMME

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However, that raises some questions. What if greens were mowed higher, say at 3/16 of an inch instead of 1/8 inch? Would it make any difference in scoring?

If greens were slower, the best golfers would still win.

Consider this story: An American golfer comments to a sage Scottish golfer about how bad the greens are and that his ball might bounce away from the hole. The Scot replies, "Aye, but it just as well might bounce in!" The moral of this story: The element of luck has been eliminated from American sports because we have grown to believe that luck is a bad thing.

Accepting the reality that good and bad luck is gone forever, there is another factor that is equally, if not more, important. How much energy has been expended in the last 25 years for the development of better grasses, pesticides and equipment so turfgrass can be maintained at higher green speeds? What decrease in maintenance costs and input would be realized if cutting heights went from 1/8 of an inch to 3/16 of an inch? Would pesticide applications and irrigation costs decrease?

To the best of my knowledge, there are no scientific studies comparing the cost to maintain a green at higher cutting heights or the effects on pesticide use. But this research would provide some interesting comparisons because

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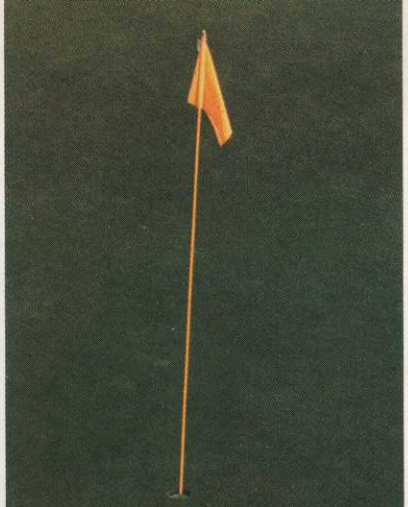
all the energy expended to maintain fast greens has resulted in a decrease of one stroke per round for less than 1 percent of the world's golfers. The rest of us subgolfers have not improved our scores at all.

Slower greens will also add an element of golf course design that is in danger of becoming extinct — that is, greens with character and contour. The famous golf architect, Alister MacKenzie, wrote his rules for golf design during the early 1900s. His ideal golf design principle No. 4 states:

"The greens and fairways should be sufficiently undulating (contour), but there should be no hill climbing."

If we follow the current pattern of thinking that fast is good and faster is better, we will soon be playing on greens that are flat or impossible to putt on if undulating.



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MIKE KLEMME

I'll never forget playing the first hole at The National Golf Links in Long Island, N.Y. The first green had so much undulation you could not see your opponent's feet if he was standing 10 yards away on the same green. I'm not saying every course needs greens shaped like the Himalayas, but I miss playing on greens that offer interesting breaks and rolls.

Undulating greens add character to design. But greens mowed continually at 1/8 of an inch force an architect to design one style of green — flat.

Professional sports and the money they generate will make it difficult to change the way greens, bunkers and turfgrass are manicured. I doubt the PGA or USGA would want to deal with the controversy that would result from raising cutting heights on greens or roughing up the sand in bunkers for professional events. Many of the touring pros would protest vehemently, exclaiming the course conditions were terrible.

I always feel like a voice in the wilderness when writing about fast greens and perfect conditions. I can only hope that I will occasionally have the opportunity to play golf on a course were the greens have character, and I'm playing with a group that appreciates the same. ■

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