

# Blast Off

**F**orget the new bentgrass varieties. They have nothing on my latest idea for an improved putting surface: concrete.

I know it sounds radical, but just think of the advantages: no mowing, no aeration (you'll be a hero in the pro shop), no slicing, no spiking, no grooming, no verticutting, no topdressing — not even a fungicide application will be required. The real beauty of it, of course, is that you could finally achieve greens stimping 30 to 35 feet, depending on the wind. Sure, you're bound to go through cup-cutting shells a little quicker, but the upside is just too sweet to worry about something so minor.

OK, so we're not quite to this point yet, but doesn't it seem like we're heading down some crazy path toward an end not altogether different than this goofy scenario? When was the last time you

watched a tournament on TV and they didn't discuss how wonderfully fast the greens were stimping? I watched the Memorial Tournament in May, held at the Jack Nicklaus-built Muirfield Village GC in Dublin, Ohio. The course was in wonderful shape, as usual, and even the commentators seemed more impressed than normal with its immaculate condition. I heard praise several times for superintendent Mike McBride and his crew.

I couldn't help but listen more closely, as I fed my baby daughter a bottle, when Jack was interviewed on TV. He said he asked McBride for green speeds in the 12 to 13 range, and that because of the conditions the greens were stimping at 14 or 15.

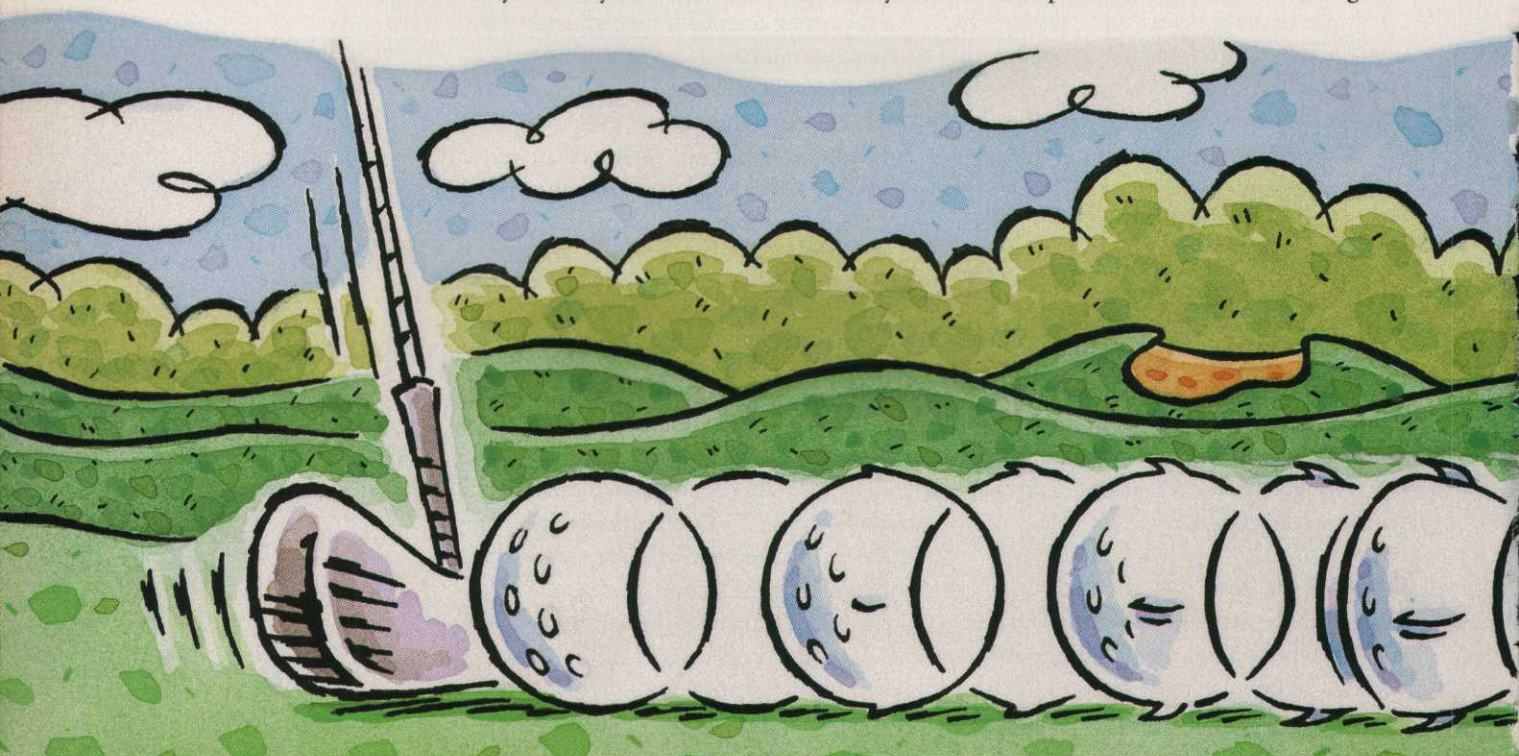
Fourteen or 15! I was so dumbfounded that the baby bottle slipped out of my daughter's mouth and she was sucking air. My wife had to shout in my ear —

“Watch what you're doing!” — to break me out of my stimp-induced stupor.

One of the problems with a PGA event course rolling at 14 or 15 lies in its consequences, commonly known as the dreaded Augusta Syndrome. Joe Golfer, sitting in front of the TV on Sunday afternoon, watches Tiger drain another 45-footer and wonders why his course, to which he pays his hard-earned money to belong, doesn't have the same perfect greens. “14 or 15,” he says to himself. “Why don't we have that? If we did, I could drain putts as easily as Tiger.”

Can you imagine having your greens stimping *anywhere* in this neighborhood for any extended period? Or can you imagine this poor fellow with his 17 handicap putting on them?

As shocking as a Stimpmeter reading of 15 may sound to some of us, McBride did put it into a certain comforting con-



## ***Skyrocketing expectations about fast greens***

### ***ignore good turf maintenance practices***

***— and the good of the game*** BY RON FURLONG

text for me when I asked him about it.

"It's all a matter of perception," he said. "For greens with a high level of slope on them, you don't have to get them up to the high numbers to get the 'feel' you're looking for. But for pool-table flat greens, you have to reach for the high numbers to achieve the same perception."

Because of the renovation of the course's greens a few years ago, McBride said he had to shoot for a 14 or even 15 to get them rolling at a perceived 12. That's because his greens are relatively flat.

"On Wednesday (of the tournament week), when the sun came out, they were extremely quick," he said. "We happened to have the right weather and the right conditions to be able to raise them to the level we wanted. It was not extremely hot. You have to be careful with speed based on weather conditions."

So back to Joe Golfer. Although we

can sometimes justify a 14 or 15 Stimp-meter reading, it's hard to justify it for a typical Thursday afternoon on Joe's course, especially if its greens have slopes. More than likely, Joe doesn't understand PGA Tournament conditions, including slopes of greens and the weather's effect on them. He hears the talk of the high stimp number, sees the beautiful greens and watches the 45-footers sink. Then a light goes on in his head.

At a recent job interview, I was asked how fast I could get the greens. I answered with the politically correct response, "Whatever you want them to roll." I didn't add that dead poa annua rolls around 20 to 25. The problem isn't so much the question, but where did this mentality come from? Why the great need for speed?

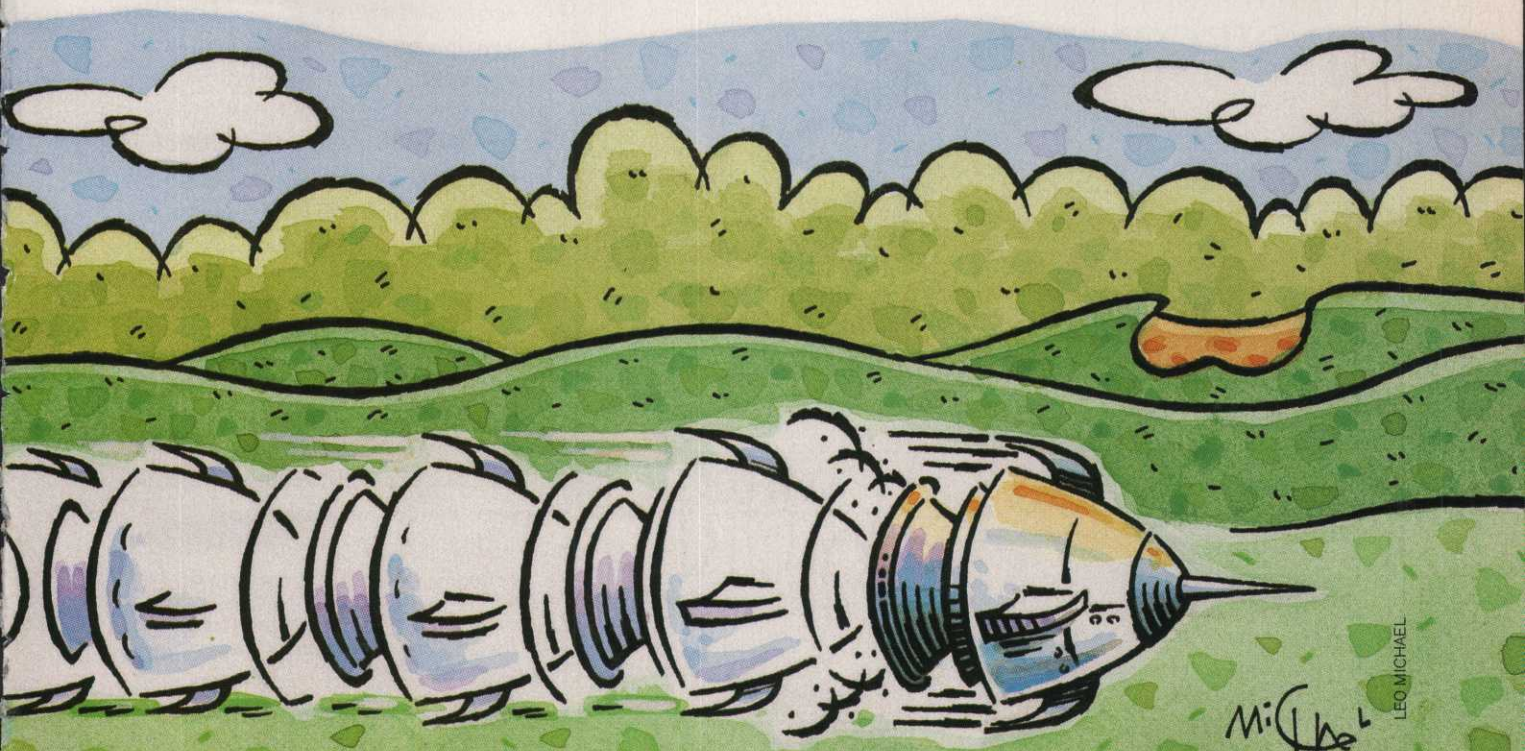
Let's briefly examine the history of the device that ostensibly measures speed. Ed-

ward S. Stimpson invented the Stimp-meter in 1935 to measure the *consistency* of ball roll on greens, not *speed*. The device will tell you if your sixth green has the same ball roll as your 14<sup>th</sup> green. If you use this tool properly, you'll know that each green is rolling a similar distance. Isn't that what's ultimately the most important factor? In the late 1970s, the USGA modified it and made it available to superintendents and course officials.

If only superintendents had kept it a secret. If the pro had asked a superintendent what he was doing with the device, the superintendent could have said any number of things to throw the pro off the scent — like it was a tool the irrigation technician had invented to locate drain tile underneath the green.

If you only had a dime for every time a member has caught you on the putting

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green and told you how quick the greens were in the tournament he played at another course the previous day. "Our greens just don't seem as fast," he tells you. You can insert your own delicate answer here, such as, "Perhaps they were maintaining the greens at lower speeds for the tournament," or "Perhaps they have greens

with more severe undulation." My favorite answer, though I never have the courage to say it, is: "Perhaps you're not as familiar with their greens as ours, making them more difficult for you. Thus, they merely *seemed* faster."

One of my favorite pieces on green speed comes from Larry Gilhuly, executive director of the Northwest Region for

the USGA Green Section. Larry did a survey of the Pacific Northwest Golf Association and the Washington State Golf Association Board of Directors. He asked them, "What expectations do you have regarding the playing conditions, maintenance, and overall atmosphere of a golf course when you play?" The No. 1 response to this question was, "Smooth greens of adequate pace." What a beautiful answer.

"The first and most emphatic answer in most cases was fast greens," Gilhuly wrote. "Upon further discussion, most of the respondents really wanted smooth greens with decent speed. Not surprisingly, those who still insisted on fast greens were single-digit players."

No one wants slow greens. In fact, you might even catch me on the practice green crouched down with the Stimpmeter in one hand. It is a tool like any other that provides us with information. What we do with that information is key. No one wants to take a step back. But when we start hearing numbers like 14 and 15, you have to start to wonder how much is enough. Is there no end?

Here's an idea: For all televised PGA events, the Stimpmeter reading isn't publicized. I'm not saying officials shouldn't measure green speed, but they should keep it under wraps. PGA officials and superintendents can know, but it should stop there. When asked what the greens are rolling, officials can respond with the only answer that really matters, "We have smooth greens of adequate pace."

The USGA provides an instruction booklet with the Stimpmeter. At the end of the booklet is an absolutely wonderful piece of information. It reads, "Strive for championship conditions only for limited periods of time, principally for important club events. Turfgrass failure is common when championship conditions are maintained for too long or when adverse weather conditions occur."

This is the last item in the booklet. It would be nice if it was the first. ■

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