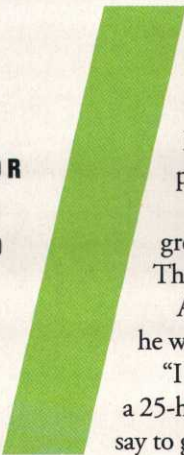


# *Do Fast Greens Have You on*

The green-speed issue is spinning out of control.  
Here's what you can do to get a handle on it

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES SHEPHERD



It was lunchtime at Butler National Golf Club. Superintendent Michael Sauls sat at a dining table in the clubhouse and nibbled on his midday meal. Glancing up from his plate, Sauls saw trouble approaching him in the form of an overbearing high-handicap hacker.

"He came up to me and started complaining about the course's green speed," Sauls says. "He said, 'What's wrong with the greens? They're slow.'"

A startled Sauls stopped chewing his food. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"I had to do everything I could to bite my tongue," Sauls says. "Here's a 25-handicapper complaining that the greens are too slow. What do you say to guy like that?"

The scene unfolded about three years ago at the course in Oak Brook, Ill. It reaffirmed to the veteran Sauls that too many golfers are enamored with fast greens and that green speed is spinning out of control and hurting the game, not to mention stressing out superintendents.

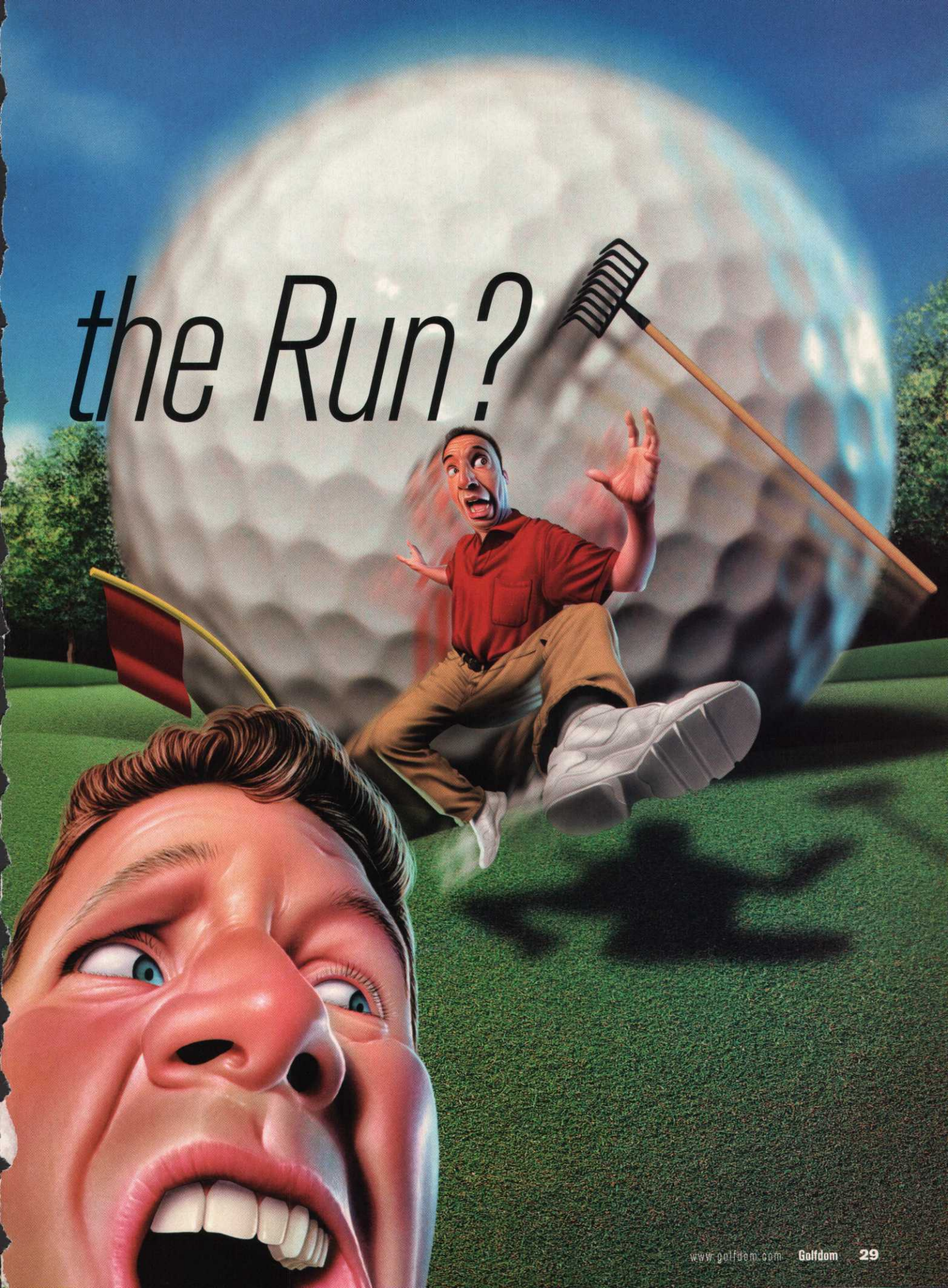
Fast greens, those running at 10 feet or higher on the Stimpmeter, are primarily a problem at private clubs, most industry insiders agree. They say the source of the problem is mainly golfers' egos. The country-club types not only like fast cars, they like fast greens.

Golfers see Augusta National's greens running lightning quick on television during Master's week, and they wonder why they can't have greens like that at their clubs. Another problem is when golfers discover that the club's greens down the street are running slightly faster than their course's. They don't hesitate to

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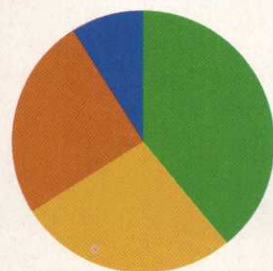


*the Run?*





### Is Green Speed an Issue at Your Course?



■ Somewhat 39%

■ Yes, but we have it under control 27%

■ Not at all 25%

■ Yes, so much that it has led to turf problems 9%

\*Based on 301 responses

Golfdom

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complain to the superintendent that their course's greens are too slow.

If fast greens didn't cause problems, superintendents surely wouldn't wince when asked by golfers to speed them up. But that's the problem: Fast greens can cause myriad problems — from damaging turf to slowing down already slow play to even getting superintendents fired. What's worse is that many golfers aren't aware of the problems, don't want to be aware of them, and wouldn't care about them even if they were aware of them.

Superintendents can lament to each other for hours on end about the headaches that fast greens have caused them, but that's not going to solve anything. At the end of the day, superintendents must let their feelings be known to golfers about the problems associated with fast greens.

The big key in that process is communicating to them that fast greens are not necessarily a good thing and shouldn't be viewed as a status symbol, industry insiders say. But insiders also point out that such a communication effort could be a long and painstaking process.

But it can work and is already showing signs of working. That's good, because no superintendent should lose his or her job over the dreaded green-speed issue — or even a night's sleep for that matter.

### A closer look

Agronomically, fast greens can stress and kill turf because it's cut too close, double mowed and topdressed regularly. Fast greens also increase maintenance budgets because the greens must be intensely managed.

Fast greens can cause many once-conventional greens, especially ones with undulations, to become unplayable. This not only causes frustration among golfers who can't make putts, but adds more time to their already-long rounds.

Fast greens can also cause superintendents to lose their jobs. A talented superintendent can get fired for refusing to speed up his course's greens at members' requests because he knows he could damage the turf. Worse, a superintendent could get fired for "mismanaging" turf because it died after he succumbed to the pressures to make the greens faster.

The green-speed issue has many superintendents in a bind, but they're not the only ones complaining about it. Architects, seed producers and others also believe that fast greens are impairing golf.

Bill Kerman, senior project designer for Hurdzan/Fry Golf Course Design in Columbus, Ohio, says green speed is a bigger issue than equipment, another controversial issue that's getting a lot of attention. Green speed is bigger because it affects average golfers more, Kerman stresses.

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## Fast Greens a Slow Issue on Public Courses

Green speed is not a major issue at most public courses, industry experts say. Hence, it's easier for superintendents to regulate green speed on public tracks, says Bill Kerman, senior project designer for Hurdzan/Fry Golf Course Design in Columbus, Ohio.

Kerman says most golfers at public courses only care if the greens look good and are rolling smoothly. "They don't care if the greens are rolling at 9 feet or 10 feet on the Stimpmeter," Kerman adds. "They won't demand that they roll at 12."

Ron Ross is the certified superintendent of Quarry Oaks Golf Club, a 7-year-old public course located in Ashland, Neb., between Omaha and Lincoln. The green fee at Quarry Oaks, a well-respected and

popular design, is about \$65 on the weekend. Most of the golfers who play Quarry Oaks sport double-digit handicaps who could give a nine iron about fast greens, Ross says.

In fact, if Quarry Oaks' large and undulated greens were stimping at 10 feet or higher, most of the golfers would be spending a good portion of their days on the course, which would not be a good thing, Ross says.

"I've been here for seven years and these greens have never rolled more than 9 feet," Ross says.

Ross says Quarry Oaks doesn't lose customers because they're unhappy with the course's green speeds. However, some single-digit handicap players might com-

ment on Quarry Oaks' slower greens. "But I expect to hear that from them," he says.

Still, Ross says most good golfers realize the greens are slower at Quarry Oaks because they have to be — it's a public course that must serve a variety of golfer skills.

"We try to be everything to everybody, and that's hard to do," Ross says. "We're not going to have fast greens, but we're not going to have really slow greens. The course will be fair."

Ross ensures, however, that all of Quarry Oaks' greens are running at the same speed. He doesn't want to lose golfers because they're unhappy about the lack of consistency with green speed.

— Larry Aylward, Editor



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"The issue is opening up a wider separation between good golfers, and average and bad golfers," Kerman adds.

Skip Lynch, technical agronomist and bentgrass product manager for Seed Research of Oregon in Corvallis, Ore., says today's superintendents are cutting greens at "ridiculously low" mowing heights.

"There's nothing good about fast greens," Lynch says. "If a player says his game is better on fast greens, I'd ask him to prove it."

Tim Moraghan, director of championship agronomy for the USGA, says most golfers have no idea what kind of pressure they're placing on superintendents when they demand fast greens. "Green speed is completely out of control," he adds.

According to a recent survey of superintendents by *Golfdom*, 75 percent of superintendents from private and public courses said green speed is an issue at their courses. Nine percent reported that green speed is so much of an issue that it has led to turf problems.

Most of the players who complain about green speed are single-handicap players with large egos, sources agree. But because they're good players, their voices are heard.

"It's a shame they have such power," Lynch says. "It's minority rule and majority neglect."

One has to look no further than Butler National to see the problems that fast greens can cause on a private course. Butler is a private club with an affluent and all-male membership located about 20 miles west of Chicago. The 32-year-old club, designed by George



*"The issue is opening up a wider separation between good golfers, and average and bad golfers."*

**BILL KERMAN**, ARCHITECT  
HURDZAN/FRY GOLF COURSE DESIGN

and Tom Fazio, features Penneagle greens.

Sauls says the green-speed issue has grown worse at Butler National in the past five years. He says he's tried to maintain consistent green speeds between 10 and 10.5, but it's a challenge.

"If they're at 11, the members are happy," Sauls says. "If they get below 10, I get chastised."

Sauls says 99 percent of Butler National's members are members at other clubs. Hence, they're always comparing courses — especially

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## Gluttons for Punishment

One of the big problems with green speed is that most golfers, including many pros, don't understand the difference between fast greens and smooth greens, says Skip Lynch, technical agronomist and bentgrass product manager for Seed Research of Oregon in Corvallis, Ore.

Golfers think they want fast greens, but what they really desire are smooth greens that aren't bumpy like a pothole-ridden street after a cold winter, Lynch says. They want greens where their balls glide after being struck.

The problem is they think smooth greens come from mowing them short, which does just the opposite. "The tighter you mow, the more surface imperfections and bumps are going to show," Lynch says.

At Butler National Golf Club, an upscale private course located in Oak Brook, Ill., golfers don't care about smooth greens, says Michael Sauls, the course's superintendent. They want speed, and they love it when Sauls gets the greens running at 11 feet or higher on the

Stimpmeter for club championships and invitationals.

"They're three-putting or four-putting, but they really like the challenge," Sauls says. "The faster I get them, the better they like them. It's scary."

But golfers who don't mind four-putting for the sake of having fast greens are discrediting the sport, Lynch says.

"That type of attitude is one step below a clown's head and a windmill," he says. "That isn't golf."

— L.A., Editor



### Living Dangerously

Word on the street is there's a dangerous game of chicken going on between some superintendents. It seems these superintendents, mostly from private clubs, are competing against each other to see whose course can have the fastest greens in town. Larry Aylward comments on this matter in his "Pin High" column on page 10.

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green speeds. Sauls says members will come to him and tell him the club down the street has greens stimping at 11 feet. And they ask him why Butler National's greens aren't running that high.

"It's a dilemma for me, whether or not the speeds are true speeds or whether or not they're just perceived to be faster," Sauls says. "But when our greens are slower ... that doesn't cut it."

Problem is, when the summer furnace kicks on in Chicago and temperatures soar into the 90s, Sauls is forced to back off the double mowing and rolling so he doesn't damage the greens.

"As soon as I do that, the green speed drops into the upper nines or mid-nines," he says. "That's when all hell breaks loose. I can't go in the clubhouse."

Sauls, who has been at Butler National for 14 years, says the cost of maintaining greens has doubled during his tenure because of increased green speed. It's not a huge cost to his overall budget because the greens only comprise about three acres of the course. But it matters.

Sauls now has six crew members devoted to mowing greens, instead of four members in 1990. The greens are double cut five days a week and rolled the other two days.

"We topdress religiously every two weeks with a light vertical mowing in between," Sauls says. "We use growth regulators every 10 to 14 days."

Sauls says the Penneagle bent doesn't perform well under stress. "But I'm proud of what I've been able to do with this grass — keep the speeds up and keep the *Poa annua* infestation to a minimum."

It's one thing for members to instruct the

superintendent to speed up the greens for the member/guest and the club championship. But it's another thing to expect the superintendent to have the greens stimping between 10 and 11 for the entire golf season. Eventually, the stress placed on the greens over an extended period of time can lead to turf damage, Moraghan warns.

Fast greens can also wreak havoc on superintendents' psyches. Many superintendents agree to increase green speed to appease members because they don't want to end up in the unemployment line.

"They're afraid to speak up because they're afraid of losing their jobs," Lynch says.

### The education factor

The bottom line is that superintendents must answer to golfers. Sauls realizes that, but he wasn't afraid to voice his opinion about the dangers of fast greens when members instructed him to make them faster. He also asked his greens chairman to promise not to fire him if the greens died from being overly stressed.

Sometimes, the best thing a superintendent can do is speak up, especially if he feels pressure mounting on him to do something he knows is not the best thing for the turf, Moraghan says.

"The average club member doesn't have the information or education to understand what's required to maintain a golf course," Moraghan says. "We're not Carl Spackler (from *Caddyshack*) — throw a little fertilizer on, water it and cut it. There's a little bit more to it than that."

So it's integral for superintendents to educate members politely about the dangers

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## Fast Greens Handcuff Architects

The greens at the classical courses, with their wonderful waves and wrinkles, can become virtually unputtable if mowed at one-sixteenth of an inch. Alas, if greens keep getting faster, architects will have to design boring, flat oval greens, says Bill Kerman, senior project designer for Hurdzan/Fry Golf Course Design in Columbus, Ohio.

If architects can't design greens with contours, then players won't be able to read them, an essential component of

putting. "Then putting becomes a pure concept of speed control," Kerman says.

Fast greens aren't making the game any easier, and the game desperately needs to be easier to attract more players, says Tim Moraghan, tournament agronomist for the USGA. One can assume that most high-handicap players aren't having fun if they're constantly four-putting and scoring eights because of difficult-playing greens.

"There has to be some kind of reward

for your effort," Moraghan says. "There's nothing better in golf than to be rewarded for making a good shot or making a good putt. But if rewards stop happening, I'm afraid people won't come back."

The common mantra among designers is that they will build courses that are challenging for expert golfers, but playable and forgivable for average golfers, Kerman says. But demands for fast greens are making that difficult for architects to do, he adds.

— L.A., Editor

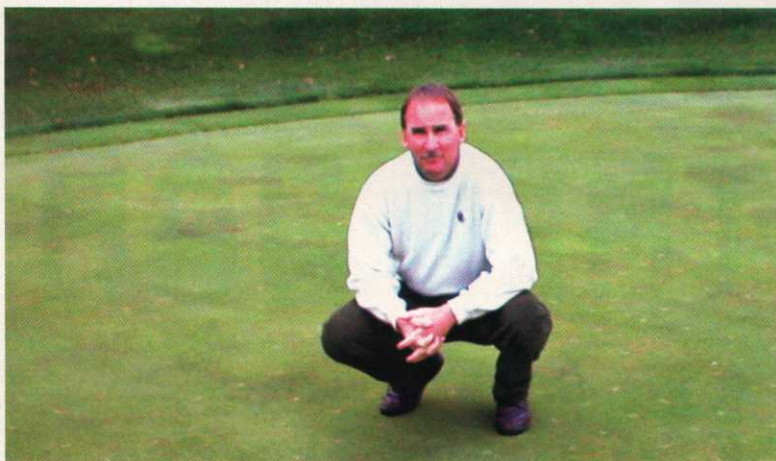


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of fast greens. But how does one do that?

"In communicating the hazards of green speed, a superintendent has to find the right argument for his target audience," Lynch says.

Superintendents can make the economic argument that fast greens will increase the speed in which money is spent to maintain them, Lynch says. Or they can argue that fast greens will only inflate many golfers' handicaps.



***"The members are determined. They want fast greens day in and day out."***

**MIKE SAULS**, SUPERINTENDENT  
BUTLER NATIONAL GOLF CLUB

"Ask them if their shots are running through greens," Lynch says. "Tailor the argument toward their performances on the golf course."

Another argument is that fast greens lead to more putts that cause slow play and prolonged rounds, Lynch says.

Sometimes, education comes in the form of lost turf caused by stress from managing greens too intensely to keep them fast. But something good could come from such a situation, as in a wake-up call to members. Lost turf at the expense of fast greens might get some members thinking, especially if they lose the course for a month during the replanting.

"Then [members] might say, 'OK, we screwed up. How can we not make these mistakes again?'" Moraghan says.

### **Better turf, but ...**

Recently, Sauls told Butler National's members that the course's greens would have to

be fumigated and regrassed with a newer and better bentgrass if they wanted fast greens throughout the season.

"I thought they would back off, but they said, 'OK, what's it going to take and what's it going to cost?'" Sauls says. "The members are determined. They want fast greens day in and out."

In the fall, the course will be closed, fumigated and regrassed with one of the A series bentgrasses from Turf-Seed. The A series bentgrasses develop a deep root system and perform well under high traffic, according to Turf-Seed. They also don't have to be managed so intensely to keep them fast.

Sauls believes he'll be able to provide greens running at 10.5 daily, even during hot stretches. He hopes that's fast enough.

New turf varieties are more apt to withstand the stress that comes with fast greens. William Myer, director of the turfgrass breeding project at Cook College/Rutgers University, says some of the newer bentgrass varieties are more dense and hold up better to low cutting heights and traffic.

"Some of the newer bents look denser and brighter and are more dollar-spot resistant," Myer says. "And because they're denser, they're more competitive with *Poa annua* than the older bents."

But that doesn't mean the new bents are completely shielded from the problems associated with fast greens. Lynch says some superintendents mistakenly believe that seed and turf companies can correct the agronomic problems that come with fast greens through scientific know-how. These superintendents believe companies can create and market turf seed that can withstand the rigors of low-mowing heights, intense maintenance and the worst Mother Nature has to offer. But Lynch warns superintendents not to be wishful thinkers when it comes to having the perfect turf for fast greens.

"There's no magic bullet," he affirms.

Those caught in the middle of the green-speed issue wonder if the saga will ever end. Or will greens just keep getting faster and faster?

"Is somebody going to say, 'If I can get the greens rolling at 12, why can't I get them rolling at 13? Kerman says. "And if I can get them to 13, why can't I get them to 15?"

One thing is for sure: Superintendents don't need anymore high-handicap golfers complaining that their courses' greens are too slow. ■