

# Reckless Op?

The push to increase green speed hasn't slowed down, which could mean there's an accident waiting to happen

By Thomas Skernivitz  
Managing Editor

**T**om Athy, a certified superintendent with a rep for quick greens, reluctantly takes the Gale Sayers approach when admitting who exactly dictates green speed:

*The club is first.  
The playing majority is second.  
And I am third.*

Athy accepts this, even if it means sometimes putting aside the best interests of his 18 pampered possessions at Omaha (Neb.) Coun-

try Club. Ever the realist, he goes as far as to amend Arnold Palmer, who once said that in order to succeed in the golf business, one must identify what the majority of otherwise finicky golfers wants and provide for it.

"For the most part that is an excellent quote," Athy says. "In reality, though, you need to find the course conditions that the 'power' within the club would like to see and provide for them. Then you hope this group doesn't change too often. Otherwise you can look pretty bad."

Change is one thing. Superintendents roll with it. But when it comes to the green

When it comes to the green speed dilemma, sooner or later healthy greens — and reputations — are going to suffer.

It doesn't help that ordinary players desire pro-worthy conditions. It's gotten to the point where some are even caught packing their own Stimpometers.

"If somebody plays the course down the street and it's at a 12 (on the Stimpometer), it kind of gets blown out of proportion that that's what its greens are rolling every day," Sutton says. "And it kind of spreads like wildfire through the golfers. They'll make claims that they just played a course and the greens were 13, so why aren't ours? Or what can you do to get them there? And the reality is most golfers can't tell the difference between a 9 and a 10 or a 10 to a 13 Stimpometer reading."

Worse yet, it's almost futile, according to Athy, to try and convince someone that speed kills.

"Good luck!" he says. "I know that, for myself and most of my colleagues at the private clubs in Nebraska, slow greens are the *fast track* to a new position."

speed issue, those powers that be have taken change to the nth degree. And sooner or later — if not already — healthy greens are going to blemish, along with the reputations of their keepers.

"I don't know if it's gotten worse in the last year, but I would say that it's still probably the biggest issue that's facing us," says Don Sutton, the certified superintendent at Kinsale Golf Club in Powell, Ohio. "I don't think it's gone away at all."

Will it ever disappear?

"You would think at some point we would have to hit a limit to where these greens are able to survive and stay healthy over a five- or 10-year period," Sutton says.

With that bar still rising (and turf heights going the other way), many superintendents are at the mercy of their managers, who often cater to the wants — realistic or not — of their customers.

"I would say in most cases it's probably from hearing the pressures from the golfers," Sutton says. "There's that fear at most courses that if they're not as fast as the neighboring courses, they're going to lose rounds of golf."

## Majority rules

Michael Morris believes the paying public would be far more receptive if superintendents approached them with data. The certified superintendent at Crystal Downs Country Club in Frankfurt, Mich., performed a study in 2001-02 that helped establish the ideal green speed for his course, based on customer response. Now, when low handicappers complain about a green being too slow at the same time lesser golfers are claiming just the opposite of the same hole, Morris can turn to the study results and remind everyone of the proven consensus.

"All we have to do is show them the survey and say, 'Here's how the golfers of this club rated the green speeds.' And the problem has essentially gone away," Morris says. "Is that person happy? Probably not. But for whom do we take care of the golf course? A customer satisfaction rating of 70 percent or above is what our target is. We're not going to make everyone happy."

The problem, Morris says, is that more than 90 percent of U.S. golf courses and their

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MIKE KLEMM

Don Sutton, of Kinsale Golf Club (shown here) outside Columbus, Ohio, says the green speed issue hasn't "gone away at all."

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superintendents don't know what their customers want. "They haven't even asked them," he says. "We've left the golfer out of the equation, and we have to be a little more diplomatic."

Gone, he adds, is the day of the old "it's-my-way-or-the-highway Scottish stereotypical superintendent."

"I'm trying to serve the golfers," Morris says. "They pay a lot of money to play here. They want conditions a certain way. I need to find out what conditions they want, and I need to communicate to the powers that be the resources I need to provide those conditions. I'm trying to get our customer satisfaction rating up around 70, 80, 90 percent. This is a whole different way of looking at it."

In the end, Morris says, superintendents regain control of their greens.

"The problem doesn't go away, but we've developed a method of addressing it, and our greens are alive and well," he says. "We're given the funding we need to improve the putting green quality and we're all communicating on the issue."

"No one tells me what heights to mow. It's up to me to decide how to get the greens in

the best condition that pleases the most golfers. ... And we've actually raised our height of cut and still maintain the putting green speeds that satisfy most of our golfers."

### Agronomic techniques

The last thing Morris wants to do to improve green speed is lower his mowing height. And he frowns upon depriving his greens of water for long durations. Hence, he relies on rolling, plant growth regulators and altered fertilizer practices.

"We have to look at it as an integrated approach and not just turning off the water and mowing the greens down to the dirt. Any idiot knows that those things will kill grass," he says. "We found that one of the very most important things that gave us the biggest bang for our buck was to improve our mower sharpening and grinding. And we purchased rollers. We implemented use of PGRs."

Athy's favorite techniques include regular verticutting; topdressing lightly at least every two or three weeks during the season; rolling Thursday to Sunday during a normal week and possibly the entire week for special events; spoon-feeding; and the use of PGRs and some potassium silicate formulations. The one thing he doesn't rely upon is double-cutting.

**"We've left the golfer out of the equation, and we have to be a little more diplomatic."**

MICHAEL MORRIS, CRYSTAL DOWNS CC

"It is a rarity anymore to double-cut greens," he says. "We have researched the increase in ball roll, double-cut vs. rolling, and have found that rolling is the equal to double-cutting and at times increases speeds even more than double-cutting. Plus, I'm not too excited about double-cutting greens every day for a week, whereas I will roll greens for a week."

Sutton topdresses about every two weeks at

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### "Anything lower than 0.1 inch is an accident waiting to happen."

TOM ATHY, OMAHA CC

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Kinsale and aerifies in the spring and fall. He runs a grade-and-verticut machine at least once a year with a possible move to twice annually.

"What I feel that does is gives us a very firm putting surface because it's removing excess thatch from our putting surface, and I think that's a real key," Sutton says. "That adds not only to the ball speed but also to the difficulty of sticking a shot on the green. That's a challenge to the low- and high-handicappers."

Sutton also singles out the implementation of L-93 on his greens.

"The development of some of the new grasses has helped green speeds. L-93 is a denser, tighter growing grass that gives a better putting surface. It's also a grass that does tolerate being mowed at an eighth-of-an-inch. It handles it very well, and you can actually go lower with it."

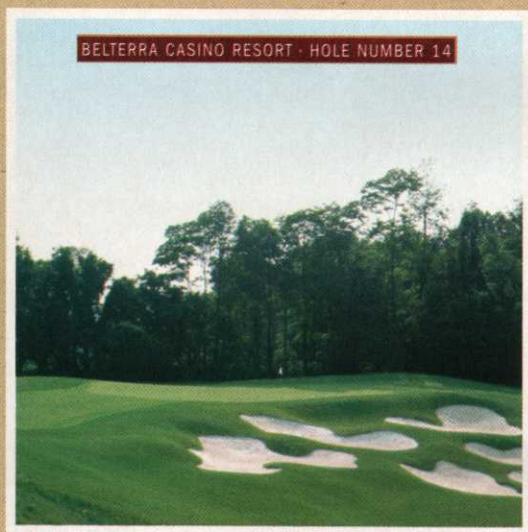
As for heights of cut, Athy says they generally range across the country in the 0.125-inch to 0.1-inch range. "Once in a while you

hear of lower heights," he says. "But most of us feel that the superintendent is either fudging the number or has just recently updated his resume. Anything lower than 0.1 inch is an accident waiting to happen."

Disaster might have already occurred, says Sutton, had it not been for mild summer conditions in 2003 and 2004. Similarly moderate temperatures might allow superintendents to remain at 0.1 inch or lower.

"But I'm wondering when we have our first hot-dry or hot-wet summertime what's going to happen with some of the very low mowing heights," Sutton says. "That's going to be a big test in the future."

"My course is only 1 year old ... and with the undulations on my greens, (golfers) are probably going to think that they're rolling a lot faster anyway. But I hear it from other superintendents in the (Columbus) area that are now mowing down at a 0.1-inch. We're still at 0.125-inch right now, but I'll probably go a little bit lower this year to try it." ■



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