

At the Masters recently, all eyes were on the beloved second cut, Augusta National's euphemistic way of describing the 1 3/8-inch rough guarding its fairways. It was the 10th Masters played with the corridors narrowed. And because writers love a good anniversary, you can be sure there was plenty written about it (myself included in *Golf World's* Masters Preview).

Ignore that the second cut is an insult to the vision of architects Alister MacKenzie and Bobby Jones, who did not believe in dictating tee shots be played down a narrow center line. Instead, they wanted players to choose the best angle of attack depending on the day's hole location.

The club says the second cut was designed to deliver a half-shot penalty. While they offer up bits of statistical evidence that this has occurred, most players feel the second cut has made Augusta National less complicated. That's a euphemism for easier.

Some say the second cut has not added the hoped-for difficulty in large part because U-grooves make flyer lies less common in today's game, negating the impact of this light rough. Even worse, U-grooves have devalued the impact of firm greens and important angles in course design.

I was not an initial supporter of the United States Golf Association's desire to outlaw U-grooves, figuring it was just a lazy way out of dealing with a golf ball rollback. After all, so the theory goes, if the world's best can't spin it out of the rough, they are going to concentrate on hitting fairways instead of bombing and gouging. While that theory is a bit naïve and overvalues the importance of rough, I recently saw firsthand how the grooves are a menace to the core values of the game.

Researching a *Golf World* story about PGA Tour course setup, I was allowed to tag along with tour official John Mutch at the Target World Challenge. Played at Sherwood Country Club, the December event faced record-cold temperatures overnight, leaving superintendent Sean Dyer's course covered in morning frost.

Time to Get in the Right Groove

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



Many greens were declared mowable within only 30 or so minutes of the first groups coming through.

Walking on the greens, I can safely say they were brick hard. Though they would thaw out a bit, anyone watching shots played into them saw a significant first-ball bounce. So after he posted a ho-hum 62, I asked Tiger Woods a generic question about the course setup that day.

"Well, the field staff set it up probably a little bit more difficult today pinwise, but the greens were soft. I mean, that's the thing that allows us to be aggressive," Woods said. "I fire at pins that I normally don't fire at here. One, we had no wind, and we had greens that were backing balls up. We had to watch out for spinning the ball back too much with nine irons and wedges."

I asked Mutch if I was watching a different tournament. "No," he said with a smile before reciting the tour's slogan, "these guys are good."

But he concurred that the greens were very firm — downright hard in spots.

So yes, these guys are good. But if skill is something worth protecting, then they can play just fine with V-grooves.

If the USGA and R&A can agree on an unprecedented rollback that restores V-grooves to tournament golf, it will re-establish meaning to green firmness and sound course design. Such a shift still won't address the distance gains that have cost untold millions in unnecessary course adjustments, but at least a groove change might encourage lower rough heights.

And this move might return the flyer to its rightful place in the game as a much more interesting dilemma than looking for lost balls and wedging out of deep hay.

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Contributing Editor Geoff Shackelford can be reached at geoffshac@aol.com.