



# The Most Important **Redefinition** We've Ever Seen?

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**A**t the Golf Industry Show in February, the American Society of Golf Course Architects had just emerged from a closed-door meeting. Two scions of the profession, Alice and Pete Dye, approached Golf Digest Architecture Editor Ron Whitten in the Orange County Convention Center hallway. When Pete and Alice come calling, you listen.

With Bruce Charlton ascending to the ASGCA presidency, they explained to Whitten that there would be an increased emphasis on environmental issues. The Dyes told Whitten that one of the ways to immediately impact the game would be through some sort of environmental category in the highly influential Golf Digest course rankings.

Whitten explained that the panelists had enough on their plates already, so Pete started in on his beef about what he called the "excessive use" of water on American courses. Whitten countered that maybe it was time to redefine the magazine's conditioning category.

The old Golf Digest ballot definition for "Conditioning" went like this: "How would you rate the playing quality of tees, fairways

and greens when you last played the course?"

This disastrous 18-word definition left the magazine open to extreme hostility from golf course superintendents and architects who found it emphasizing the manicuring and beautification of turf over leaner conditions that would produce firm and fast golf.

Under those fluorescent lights of the convention center halls, a debate ensued over the proper rewording for the conditioning category should Whitten get it approved by his superiors. The Dyes nominated sentences that emphasized "firm and rolling," but were leery about giving the impression that golf should have greens that don't hold. Whitten came back with something about "firm and fast" but also threw in a stipulation about greens still holding.

They eventually settled on the language: "How fast, firm and rolling were the fairways, and how firm yet receptive were the greens on the date you played the course?"

Whitten e-mailed Jerry Tarde, head honcho of Golf Digest, who circulated the proposed redefinition among the editors. They came back with questions, as editors are prone to do, most wondering about a panelist playing two days after a heavy rain.

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Golf Digest's new conditioning definition could change course maintenance in a big way



## Redefinition

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Whitten noted that Golf Digest panelists were smart enough to understand such circumstances, and then volleyed back with comments about courses that don't drain well, which would give superintendents ammunition to install better drainage.

But mostly Whitten saw this as an opportunity to reward a cut back on water usage. The editors agreed, especially since they could incorporate this in the May issue where they were preparing to run a 30-page report on golf's place in the environment by writer John Barton.

This unprecedented package would be the ideal place for Golf Digest to influence what the publication sees as a crisis for the game — what the magazine calls golf's excessive water use and the need to irrigate a lot less. Considering that Golf Digest was putting the finishing touches on its May issue, this radical change in its conditioning definition just barely slipped into the coverage. While kinks must be worked out, the unprecedented change speaks to the urgency of the issues at hand.

As much as it pains most of us to give any golf magazine the impression we respect their rankings (lest it go to their head), Golf Digest is the most-powerful media outlet in the sport with 1.5 million subscribers. No matter what you think of rankings or how much you might quibble over the definition of categories used by panelists, we're about to find out just how influential Golf Digest really is. This will also put more pressure on the Golf Digest

panel to start looking closely at maintenance practices and drainage. But the times are a-changing — sort of. I had the privilege of speaking to the Golf Digest Panelist Summit last fall, where the group convened at Pinehurst to talk shop.

The seminar gave me newfound admiration for Golf Digest's efforts to improve its highly influential golf course rankings. Sure, chats with some panelists also affirmed my cynical take on the panel and its inability to understand the issues facing superintendents and architects. I'd say about 40 percent of the panelists are serious students of the game who really grapple with the rating process. They do their best to weigh all of the elements influencing America's best layouts. Another 40 percent of the panel puts in enough of an effort to not be considered dangerous, except perhaps when it comes to conditioning and service expectations. Then there's the 20 percent of the panel that has no clue whatsoever and even less business rating course design and conditioning.

Golf Digest convenes these mandatory-attendance summits in part to learn how to weed out that 20 percent or at least get them looking at architecture more critically. Golf Digest also uses the summit to determine how best to refine the rating process and to better understand the plight of those running America's courses.

While plenty of great suggestions were bandied about last fall at Pinehurst, I didn't

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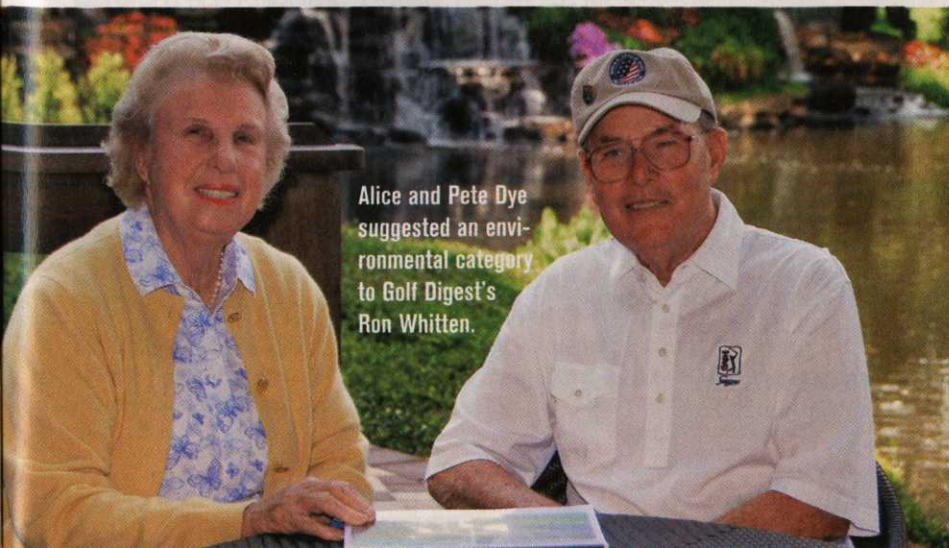
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Alice and Pete Dye suggested an environmental category to Golf Digest's Ron Whitten.



### The Author of "How Green Is Golf" Speaks

A longtime contributor to Golf Digest, John Barton spent several months researching his feature story titled, "How Green Is Golf?" Barton talked to an array of golf industry figures and penned several stories for the 30-page package designed to educate golfers about issues facing the future of the game. He sat down with *Golfdom's* Geoff Shackelford to discuss what he found and the reaction Golf Digest has received. Read it at [www.golfdom.com/onlineexclusive.com](http://www.golfdom.com/onlineexclusive.com)

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recall hearing much talk about the "conditioning" category, even though it has cost jobs and impacted lives. Because until May, courses were not rewarded by Golf Digest for environmentally sound maintenance practices or simply celebrated for presenting a firm, fast setup that meant less water usage and traditional course setup values.

As Golf Digest's Whitten wrote: "This definition has nothing to do with the color of the grass or the perfection of a lie. It rewards courses that water less (but sensibly) and makes it easy for panelists to evaluate conditions on the basis of golf shots. It takes into account all types of turfgrasses."

Now, in the hands of the 40 percent of Golf Digest panelists who get it, I have no concerns about the new definition. Unfortunately, the remaining 60 percent may not know enough to identify a course with kikuyu, paspalum or zoysia fairways, and they may not understand firm and fast according to the circumstances.

There is also that thorny issue of panelists playing after rains or when a superintendent is throwing a little more water out for maintenance purposes. Here's what Golf Digest tells its panel: "What about situations of inclement weather? Because the first rule of good golf architecture is drainage, drainage, drainage, this definition rewards that. Courses whose fairways and greens don't easily drain after a normal rain (or after routine irrigation) deserve lower conditioning scores than courses with excellent drainage."

There are kinks to work out. But when you combine the efforts to educate the panel and Golf Digest's ability to influence the direction of golf through its rankings, this could be a revolutionary moment for golf. Picture golfers reading this from the No. 1 publication in the game: "Great conditioning is not striped mowing patterns in the rough or uniform lies in bunkers. That's overindulgent cosmetics."

I'd say that's pretty good bulletin board material. ■

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