

# Lookin' Smooth

Golfers' great expectations lead to a nicer-looking and better-maintained rough

**W**hen the subject turns to course conditions, it might be too much to say that today's golfers are spoiled. At the very least, however, golfers know what they expect — and they expect a perfectly manicured course, from tees to greens.

“It is part of the Augusta Syndrome,” says Paul Diegnau, the certified golf course superintendent of Keller Golf Course in Maplewood, Minn., near St. Paul. “That is what golfers see on television, and it correlates into what they want to see at their golf clubs.”

Those higher standards that golfers carry onto the course now include the rough. They want to see uniformity in the height of the cut, and they want to see rough that is green.

There is no question that the rough has received more attention from ground crews during the past 10 to 15 years as golf course aesthetics became more desirable. Aesthetics is

the reason why some courses will mow roughs in a striped pattern, something that a decade ago would only happen on the fairways.

“When I started, it was greens and tees, then it was fairways,” says Ed Walsh, the certified superintendent of Shelter Harbor Golf Club in Charlestown, R.I., who has more than 30 years of experience as a superintendent. “Now you have a beautiful picture of greens, tees and fairways, and the rough is the frame to that picture. If your rough isn't strong, solid or consistent, then the framework of your picture will not be good.”

But playability and consistency are the most-important attributes for the long grass, Walsh points out. This means mowing the rough to a consistent height throughout the course, fertilizing the rough to ensure its lushness and ability to withstand the peak heat of the summer season, and using equipment that is typically associated with tees, greens and fairways.

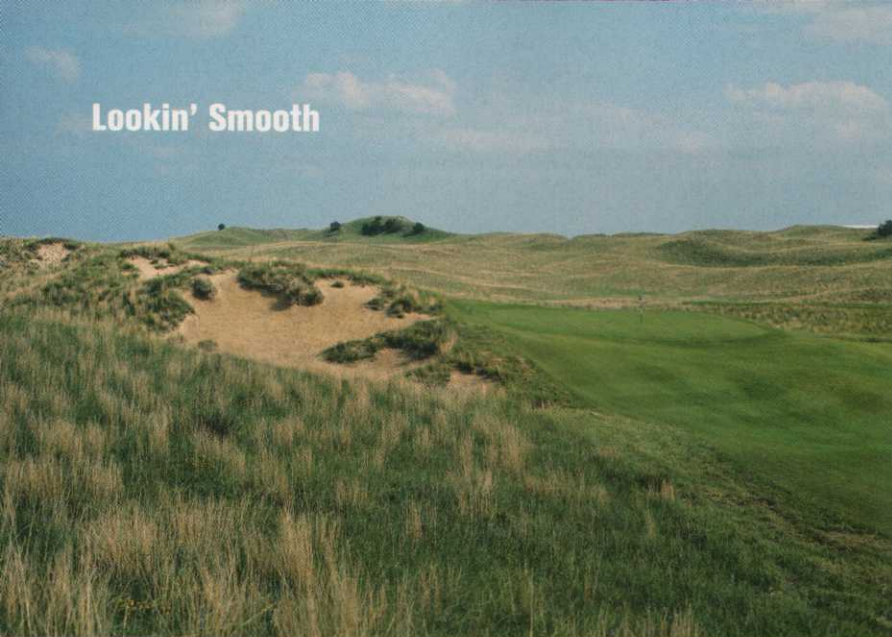
And state-of-the-art irrigation systems provide wider coverage, meaning portions

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**BY KEN KRIZNER**



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The rough at Sand Hills Golf Club has a natural look and feel, which adds to aesthetic appeal.

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of the rough receive its share of water when the fairways are being watered.

"The rough is probably getting more water than ever before because of modern irrigation systems," says Rick Slattery, superintendent of Locust Hill Country Club in Rochester, N.Y., the host-course for the Wegmans LPGA tournament.

### More maintenance

The advancement in golf course maintenance equipment plays a part in the growing attention to roughs. Mowers are more efficient, meaning the cuts are better than five to 10 years ago.

Fertilizer also has changed, says Jason Hurwitz, superintendent of Fox Chapel Golf Club in Pittsburgh. He treats his roughs with controlled-release fertilizer, which he says has a gradual nutrient release during three or four months, leading to better turf quality.

Diegnau fertilizes the Keller Golf Course rough every autumn, putting down 1 pound of nitrogen per every 1,000 square feet. He also aerifies the rough, especially the high-traffic areas.

The use of aerification equipment on the rough parallels the heightened attention the area has received.

"We definitely aerify more than in years past," Diegnau says.

Superintendents are also treating their courses' roughs with insecticides, herbicides and fungicides more often, and they are performing soil tests on the rough — another unheard-of notion years ago.

"Very rarely would we ever take a soil test on the rough unless we saw an isolated condition that was bad," Walsh says. "Our budget never took that into consideration. Today, we monitor the rough through soil testing, and we are budgeting for rough fertilization on a regular basis."

This extra attention helps the rough maintain its health and thickness during the hottest months of the summer.

"It allows the rough to grow stronger in the spring so it can weather heat spells a lot better," Hurwitz says. "The rough is definitely more heat-tolerant."

### Playing out of the rough

Some superintendents also see the influence of high-tech playing equipment on the rough.

The traditional function of the rough on a golf course is to penalize a golfer by one-half to one stroke for missing the fairway. For decades, golfers would have to take out a long iron in the hopes of getting their balls close to the green.

But grooved clubs and the rescue club — named for its ability to rescue players from the rough by combining the forgiveness, distance and height of a fairway wood with the stopping ability of an iron — has changed that.

"Hitting into the fairway should always count for something," Slattery says. "But the debate is about how much of a penalty should apply for someone who hits it into the rough. The issue we face today is players can hit easier out of the rough. That, in turn, has brought rough to a level where there isn't much of a penalty anymore."

The challenge for superintendents when it comes to the role of the rough is walking the fine line that comes with the different skill levels of golfers. While there are better players who can advance their balls from 3 inches of rough and possibly save par (or even birdie the hole), superintendents can't forget about the high-handicap golfers who play the course.

"You don't want to make their experience unpleasant," Hurwitz says. "To some degree you have to manage the rough to a level where it is a challenge to the better players, but it is also fair to the players who aren't as skilled."

Slattery notes, "The debate will always



be how much disparity should be between the golfer in the fairway and the golfer in the rough.”

### Environmental factors

While superintendents say golfers like to see shades of green across the entire playing areas, including the roughs, environmental factors might alter that thinking, if they haven't already.

Many courses allow rough areas to go natural, letting the grass grow higher and using less pesticide. Courses in the Southeast and Southwest, which are experiencing drought conditions, have had to pare their water usage.

“You have to be careful,” Hurwitz says. “You have to use a good pest management program that also protects the environment.”

This season, Fox Chapel will allow some rough areas to go natural to add aesthetic appeal and create a buffer zone between the playing area and more sensitive areas of the course.

“We have streams that run through the property that are an important habitat for birds and fish,” Hurwitz says. “The natural areas will be adjacent to the streams and separate them from roughs and fairways.”

Diegnau believes his industry must move away from “the greening of the roughs.” He maintains that roughs should be allowed to dry out and go brown because of restrictions in the use of water, fertilizer and pesticides.

He adds, however, that this is a difficult concept for the entire golf course industry to

accept and that well-respected organizations like the United States Golf Association and Professional Golfers Association need to take the lead.

“The roughs don't have to be lush green,” Diegnau stresses. “Superintendents would love that.”

### Golfer expectations rise

Superintendents say they hear complaints about the rough, but no more grumblings than they heard a decade ago. Most complaints center on inconsistency.

“Golfers don't like inconsistent roughs anymore,” Slattery says. “They don't like getting 3 inches of grass in one spot and no grass in another spot.”

Golfer expectations have led to the increased attention and care given to roughs.

“Expectations keep increasing as far as quality of playing surfaces on the golf course,” Diegnau says. “Roughs are no exception, and that is why there is more emphasis on high-quality turf in the rough.”

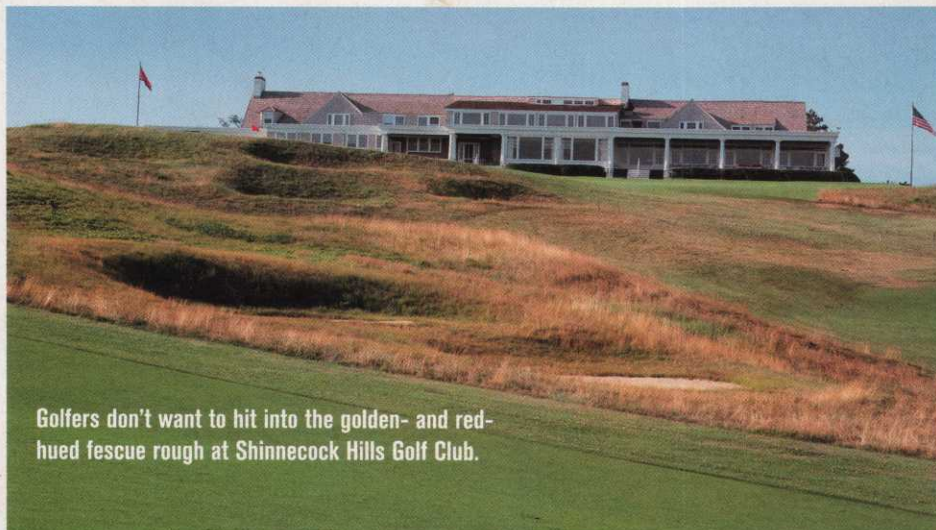
It is a long way from the time when superintendents hardly paid attention to the rough.

“Rough maintenance has changed dramatically, and it is a change that has paralleled golf conditioning and playability overall,” Slattery says. “It has evolved into higher maintenance, as much as any of our high-maintenance playing areas.” ■

*Ken Krizner is a freelance writer from Cleveland.*

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— RICK SLATTERY,  
SUPERINTENDENT OF  
LOCUST HILL COUNTRY  
CLUB



Golfers don't want to hit into the golden- and reddish-brown fescue rough at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club.