

THE POLITICS OF GREEN SPEED

BY CHRISTOPHER S. GRAY SR.

Few maintenance issues affect more superintendents, regardless of what type of facility they manage, as much as green speed. It's also the one issue that has continued to attract more awareness and greater disagreement. Sadly, it's also the one issue that we've been woefully ineffective in handling properly.

To be fair, though, the topic of green speed went from being a new issue to a full-fledged superintendent-killing machine in a ridiculously short amount of time. It was only the late 1970s when the Stimpmeter burst onto the industry as the tool that was designed to measure consistency among the greens on a course, not the speed. Even the developer of the modern Stimpmeter, USGA's senior technical director Frank Thomas, feared that course owners and green committees would use it as a "speedmeter" to compare their course's greens with competing golf courses. Boy, was he right.

Televised golf should also shoulder a significant portion of the blame for escalating the status of the Stimpmeter reading. It seems every televised tournament includes a broadcaster enthusiastically reporting the greens are Stimpmetering at 14 or some other ridiculously high number that simply doesn't translate into daily course conditioning. Such statements give ambiguous credibility to a legion of misinformed green committees and members who want the fastest greens in town.

The bottom line is television coverage of ultra-high-end courses, some of which have prepared for years for the four days of one golf tournament, have manipulated viewers to associate high-quality golf with super-fast greens. Golfers watching these broadcasts believe they can play like the professionals they're watching — and play on greens just as fast.

As a superintendent, developing an effective game plan when it comes to managing unrealistic demands for green speed hasn't been easy. One strategy involves educating golfers on the perils of maintaining abnormally high green speeds to get them to lower their expectations. By explaining to them what happens to the plant physically when techniques to produce high green speed are employed, they are supposed to see the light and decide that it's all right to slow down the greens.

Another popular strategy is lying to golfers about Stimpmeter

readings. I can't believe anyone would attempt this for fear of being fired, but I know several superintendents who have.

While these strategies have good intentions, their effectiveness has been spotty at best. Green committees and members don't want to be educated on agronomy; they want fast putting surfaces like they see on TV. It's that simple.

Michigan State University turfgrass professor Thom Nikolai, Ph.D., has outlined his concept of developing an "ideal green speed" for golf courses, which would be driven by the course's superintendent. Under this model, the superintendent would collect data on daily green speeds, survey the golfers daily on their perception of the green speed to develop the desired range, evaluate maintenance practices affecting green speeds, and communicate the results to golfers.

To date, this idea has the best chance of being effective. It addresses and uses the Stimpmeter properly. Ultimately, it will be the superintendent's communication skills that will serve this program best. Communication has always been the key to success in



our industry, which reminds me of a story.

I once visited a superintendent at his course where the topic of green speed had been a huge problem for several years, mostly with the superintendent having the final say. Immediately outside his office door, he had constructed the most creative "thing" I have seen pertaining to the green-speed issue. He took a white-plastic seed bucket and filled it entirely with cement. He then took a Stimpmeter and placed it in the hardening slur with about half of it sticking out of the top at a 60-degree angle. When it dried, he made a sign and hung it on his sculpture for all to read: *"Only the truly worthy may pull the sacred Stimpmeter from its resting place."*

I wonder how many members have tried to pull it out. ■

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