



Getting Away from Lush and Green

WHEN THE FIRST images of the Pebble Beach Golf Links putting greens came across television sets during the U.S. Open last June, the collective golf world was caught off guard.

Used to seeing lush golf courses as the color of green felt on a poker game table, the majority of commentators and viewers alike were faced with greens that, at best, were a mishmash of colors and, at worst, looked blotchy and uneven. To many people, there appeared to be something wrong — something very, very wrong — with Pebble Beach's greens.

But the fact was the putting greens

PROFESSIONAL GOLF ORGANIZATIONS SUCH AS THE USGA AND THE PGA TOUR AIM TO EDUCATE THROUGH A FIRM AND FAST APPROACH

were all right — very all right. Under the guidance of the United States Golf Association, water usage on the venerable layout had been reduced. To the untrained eye, the turfgrass may have appeared sick or dying, but it wasn't. Rather, it was healthy and played wonderfully. What appeared to be bumpy or uneven putting surfaces was merely a trick of the camera lens. The greens rolled great.

The setup wasn't an aberration.

"We wanted to present Pebble Beach

as a firm, fast golf course," says USGA President Jim Hyler. "It's a better test of golf. It's not just a point-to-point game. The greens did look a little funny (on television). But that didn't bother us."

Pebble Beach was a clarion call by the USGA to the golf world that the norm is no longer acceptable and that how golf courses are maintained must change. It was the first time one of golf's most powerful bodies made such a public statement in the United States.



The R&A is using classic clubs like Royal Birkdale, which hosted The Open Championship in 2008, as an example for other clubs to follow regarding reduced water usage

**BY ANTHONY PIOPPA,
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In the British Isles and Europe, The Royal and Ancient Golf Club has been trumpeting the same message, especially through its venues that host the Open Championship. In the United States, the PGA Tour and the LPGA Tour have been doing their parts by insisting host clubs don't over-water their layouts so they can produce golf courses where golf balls roll on fairways and don't sit and spin back on every shot hit into a green.

Hyder made water conservation through sensible irrigation a priority during his first speech as USGA president during the organization's annual meeting last February when he told the assembled, "I believe our definition of playability should include concepts of

firm, fast, and yes, even brown, and allow the running game to flourish."

To some, the words sounded hollow. Following the speech, one prominent golf writer opined: "While Pebble Beach has a cutting-edge maintenance facility and other 'green' practices, we're still likely to see a very green golf course this June."

But Hyler stuck to his word, and people didn't see a very green golf course.

The USGA took the opportunity during the tournament to explain to viewers why the course looked the way it did during a two-minute piece broadcast on NBC that highlighted the benefits of water reduction. Announcer Dan Hicks interviewed Hyler live.

"We talked about that we're really trying to raise the awareness level," Hyler says.

Hyder has also repeatedly lauded the USGA Green Section for the work it has been doing to reduce water usage. He calls the Green Section, "our best-kept secret."

It's a strategy The R&A has been using for years — holding up the classic links layouts as an example for others to follow.

"The greatest thing is we can use the Open venue as an example of what can be achieved," said Steve Isaac, director of golf course management for The R&A.

The American tours have been practicing water conservation one venue at a time.

On the LPGA Tour, for instance, the association insists that balls don't plug into fairways. Golf shots coming into greens — depending if they are hit out of the fairway, light rough or deep rough — should hold, bounce and hold or roll, says certified golf course superintendent John Miller, the LPGA Tour agronomist.

Miller says the goal is "to put down as much water as a plant needs to survive until the next watering."

Cal Roth, senior vice president of agronomy for the PGA Tour, oversees the conditions of all the tour stops.

"We want a site to be as firm as we can get it without hurting the golf course," he says. "We try and dial down the system."

Miller and Roth usually deal with venues that have hosted events for several years. It's the new sites where the push back to the agronomic practices occurs.

"It's mostly an education process," Roth says.

Adds Miller, "The big fear is we're going to cut off the water completely."

Another reason for the hesitation to change is that clubs are worried about how their courses are portrayed.

"They say, 'We want our golf course to look great on TV'; they want to portray lush and green," Miller says. "There are other ways to look lush and green besides water."

Miller's most problematic venues typically occur at LPGA sites out of the country. In 2010, events were held in Malaysia, South Korea, Thailand, Mexico and Brazil.

He named Mission Hills Country Club in Rancho Mirage, Calif., and Superstition Mountain (Ariz.) Golf Club as two of the sites that are best at reducing water usage.

Roth, who has been with the PGA Tour for 35 years, says some clubs have disregarded the directives a few times.

"We've had water run at night that wasn't supposed to be," he adds, noting that during his tenure he has witnessed an overall rise in the acceptance of reduced irrigation practices. "But it's pretty rare they go against what we recommend. For the most part, the guys we work with are doing a lot better job now. I've been around long enough to see trends and changes."

Part of the reason for the transformation is the new technology that

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allows superintendents to be better at water management.

Roth says moisture meters were used at East Lake Golf Club for the Tour Championship this year — not just on greens, but also on fairway landing areas.

“It allowed them to see how they can take [water] down on a daily basis,” Roth says. “They could see how low they could go and still maintain a healthy surface.”

Since 2008, all PGA Tour agronomists carry moisture meters for monitoring putting greens and a number of superintendents at the sites have purchased their own meters.

“It’s improved our efficiency at maintaining greens,” Roth says.

The R&A, besides staging the Open and British Senior Open, also conducts a number of amateur events and oversees Open qualifiers around the world. Many times those clubs are hesitant to follow The R&A’s guidelines fearing turf will be damaged.

“There is some concern by the venues that if we have a very, very dry year, we’re going to tip them over the edge, but we’re careful of that,” Isaac says. “We know we’re borrowing the course for a week. We don’t want to get to the point where we lose greens.”

The lesson The R&A tries to instill — not just on its tournament venues but on all golf courses — is that reducing irrigation and practicing sustainable golf can be implemented everywhere.

“Not every course is a links, but the basic principals still apply,” Isaac says.

He points to Kingston Heath in Australia, which hosted a 2010 regional Open qualifying tournament as a perfect example.

“That golf course typifies links conditioning in an inland setting,” he says.

That word must spread for the message to get across to the general public.

“It’s golfer education we need to embark on, and the USGA has done a great job on that,” Isaac says.

For The R&A, the message is being disseminated via the Web site www.bestcourseforgolf.org, with separate paths on the site for greenkeepers, administrators and golfers to follow.

The USGA’s Hyler continues to preach the word around the country.

“This is not the kind of thing you say one time,” Hyler says. “I’m not suggesting golf courses be brown; I’m suggesting you reduce water use.”

One problem Hyler

has come up against is that so many golf courses in the United States are tied to real estate, and in those situations a green layout is considered a selling point.

Another obstacle is TV golf announcers, many of whom laud a lush, green golf course as if that is the ideal condition.

“Commentator education, I don’t know who does that, but it would be useful,” Isaac says. “When viewers listen to commentators, they accept them as experts.”

The LPGA’s Miller is of the same mind.

“We’ve got to sell it to the Golf Channel people,” he says, adding that he rarely has the opportunity to chat with the announcers since he’s only occasionally at the venue when the tournament is being played. “The good news is we have the same commentators. The bad point is that I’m out ahead so I don’t get a chance to see them.”

He knows that the “brown” word hasn’t yet permeated the thinking of most announcers or viewers.

“To the average golfer watching on TV ... green means healthy,” Miller says. “And brown means unhealthy.”

There is, however, hope that golfers are coming around to the idea that what they view as the ideal, is in fact, impractical.

“It’s not as fast as I would like it to be,” says the PGA’s Roth of the change in thinking. “My opinion is that the general public thinks green is good.”

Miller foresees a long journey.

“We didn’t get into this overnight; we won’t get out of it overnight,” Miller says, warning that success isn’t guaranteed. “We can do a great job selling it, but if the end user’s not willing to accept it, we’ve run up against a brick wall.” ■

USGA President Jim Hyler just wants to see golf courses reduce their water use.

Pioppi is a longtime Golfdom contributing editor who prefers a firm and fast lawn at his home in Middletown, Conn.



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