

Augusta Syndrome is on the Downswing

A funny thing has happened in the wild and wacky timeline of Augusta Syndrome history: The very worst may have passed.

That's right, I'm boldly declaring that Augusta Syndrome's worst days are behind. Granted, the dire economy is likely to cut down on the number of golfers who demand the replication of conditions they see on television, but did you look closely at the 2011 Masters? It was a thrilling tournament for the ages and a heart-stopper, because the golf course was merely green, sort of fast but definitely not the hyped-up freak show of recent years.

Yes, it's still lush and flowery and over the top, but that will always be the case, for better or worse. However, in recent years the bold aesthetics have been complemented by desperate attempts to speed up greens, firm-up hazard banks and throw in other course setup add-ons that not only set a dreadful example for the game, but also made the Masters less fun to watch.

Either by luck or superintendent Brad Owens' shrewdness, the 2011 version of the Bobby Jones dream course played a little more like a normal golf course. The course was just a little softer, the greens not quite as fast and most of all, it was a test that encouraged risk-taking. The result was arguably the most thrilling Sunday back nine since Jack Nicklaus' epic 1986 win 25 years ago.

Maybe they put a little more rye seed down. Perhaps the spring weather

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was good to the club. And maybe, just maybe, they decided that all of the excessive low-score combating stuff of recent years — both agronomic and architectural — was doing neither Augusta nor the game any good.

If you've looked closely at late-afternoon play during the last couple of years, you can actually see footprints in the fairway grass thanks to a slightly higher fairway cut.

Which brings us to the unthinkable: The course doesn't look as good as it used to in high-definition television. To combat today's flat-belly bombers, the club mows fairways from green to tee, hoping that the slight grain will slow down drives. Since today's players launch drives over this so-called grain, it has little effect other than to slow wayward drives from reaching trouble. Even better for the game, this cutting pattern has eliminated striping and actually makes the place look a little shaggy when we see a rearview camera shot of a player approaching a green. Yes, shaggy! Augusta National!

The famed course's design is a masterpiece when it's running firm and fast, but the recent changes have

narrowed landing areas that, when sped up in tournament conditions, turned solid holes into goofy golf. Furthermore, when the greens are bricks and crew members are rolling lake banks, the entire thing becomes a farcical quest to combat the not-combatable: progress via poorly regulated equipment changes.

Yet with everything throttled back just a wee bit this year, players took a few more chances and provided the kind of thrilling shot-making that is great for the game. When golf is as good as it was during the 2011 Masters, the goose-bumps and heroic play take viewers' minds away from mundane thoughts such as how they'd like to see azaleas planted at their course.

Remember, Augusta Syndrome will always be part of the game. But through practices both intentional and accidental, the home of the Masters may just be a little less of a headache for superintendents than it used to be.

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