

## War on Green Speeds

**L**ongtime readers know that on occasion I share some feelings about technology getting out of control. It's been, what — *two months* — since I last vented about rapid equipment advances causing golf courses to bear unnecessary costs in the form of new tees, new bunkers or other silly add-ons?

Since I started writing columns here and elsewhere about the negative effects of letting pricey equipment overtake the role of skill, the response from the club manufacturer world has always been something like this: "We need new clubs and balls to grow the game and make it more fun." Well, fun has arrived in the last decade in the form of more forgiving clubs and longer flying balls. And where is the American golf industry?

Certainly not thriving thanks to technology breakthroughs.

While the economy deserves most of the blame for our doldrums, you don't hear many prospective players sitting on the sidelines because they were unable to get their hands on another \$400 driver with a watermelon-sized driver head. Yet manufacturers, who are free to make anything they want to without USGA rulemaking interference at any time, complain about rules hampering their bottom line.

Meanwhile, playing the game is much simpler for elite players, who reap substantially greater benefits from today's equipment. Combine that with widespread leaps in course maintenance, and the game has never been easier to play. So much so that longtime industry folks hear the "easy" word keep popping up in conversations with better players,

THE PRESSURE TO RAMP UP PUTTING SPEEDS HAS BEEN A RESPONSE TO THE INCREASING EASE OF THE SPORT.

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



to the point that nearly all common sense folks in the game admit the time has come to draw a line in the sand. Especially now that rough and narrow fairways have been shown to be a lame, ineffective and counter productive way to trick up a course in hopes of offsetting juiced equipment.

Which is why it's time to prepare yourself for the war on green speeds.

The pressure to ramp up putting surface speeds for competitions or even daily play has been a response to the increasing ease of the sport. But not until the 2011 U.S. Open at Congressional and July's U.S. Senior Open at Inverness did I realize the pressure the technology chase is placing on putting surfaces. After all, both courses on any given day used to put up a great fight, but strip them of any fear factor in the era of juiced equipment, and super fast, rock firm greens are the only way they can defend themselves.

Both courses were softened by rain with greens already put on the defensive by pre-tournament heat, eliminating the only chance each layout had of making juiced-club-wielding players use their brain or demonstrate something resembling old-fashioned skill. Even more fascinating though is the continued reaction that seems to suggest the course or

the people maintaining it are somehow to blame for the game being too "easy."

This is a longwinded, roundabout way to make a scary prediction: the pressure to increase green speed and firmness is only going to increase.

I know, I know. You're saying, "That's not possible." Even though fast greens are the primary culprit for slow play and a huge factor influencing cost, putting surface conditions will get more attention as long as players keep bombing and gouging 340-yard drives.

But there was one hope-inducing twist: the 2011 British Open greens were truly slow by modern major standards, kept that way by a shrewd super who knew any faster could lead to a play stoppage in high winds. The Open surfaces were estimated at around 8.5 on the Stimp by the time the leaders came through. And yet the winning score was six under par. Royal St. George's was not "easy."

Now, if there was just a way to sell paying customers on the idea that today's Hogans and Sneads do not find "slow" greens easy.

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