

# Reading Greens with **REES JONES**

“The Open Doctor” talks about what makes a golf green great, how bermudagrass will rule the South, and when it’s a good time to ignore the greens committee. **BY SETH JONES**



“The superintendents, they’ve got better mowers than they’ve ever had before,” Jones says.

**T**he son of legendary architect Robert Trent Jones, Rees Jones has stepped out of his father’s shadow by designing over 100 golf courses, as well as multiple redesigns of venues hosting major championships. Indeed, Jones has his hand in both this year’s U.S. Open (at Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Md.) and the PGA Championship (at the Atlanta Athletic Club.)

After meeting up with Jones at the annual Golf Writers Dinner in Augusta, *Golfdom* put the call out to Jones to chat with our own Jones, as in Seth Jones (no relation), to see what Rees had to say about the most important surface in the game.

***Golfdom:* What, in your mind, is the recipe for a fantastic putting green?**

**Rees Jones:** I think a fantastic putting green is where if you knock it within 20 feet, you have a real good opportunity for birdie, but if you knock it 40 feet away, you’re going to have to go across some transitions. So it pays to hit with a driver so you can get the ball close to the flag, have that birdie opportunity, and not worry about 3-putting.

The greens contours are your last defense as far as par is concerned. I think the (greens) transitions like at Augusta (National), Torrey Pines, Congressional all make it imperative to go for a flag. I think that’s really important now that the pros are hitting it 350 yards.

***Golfdom:* How about at more of an every-man’s golf course? Is there much of a difference in philosophy in greens from a course that hosts a Tour event to a low-budget course?**

**Jones:** Yes and no. If you look at Donald Ross, he had the crown greens, greens were pitched from back to front to get the water off them. There were a lot of steep

slopes on them — now, the speed of greens is much higher, so you have to be more careful on the degree of slope. (They) have to be concerned with the average player, but of course they don't run the greens at 14 on the Stimpmeter for the average golfer. They run them 9 or 10, so the greens are more puttable and easier managed at that speed.

**Golfdom: How much has the evolution of course maintenance changed the golf green?** **Jones:** Augusta is a good example of how it's changed the green; they've had to ease up on some of the hole locations. I think Ben Crenshaw just eased up a couple locations on Pinehurst No. 2, because of the speed of the greens. The new grasses are more closely mowed. They're more dense, easier to get fast and firm... so you have to modify the greens and take some of the contours out of some of the old greens.

At Atlanta Athletic Club, we converted (the greens) to Champion bermudagrass so the grass will be fast and firm this summer, and especially in August (for the PGA Championship), whereas 10 years ago, the greens were a little slow and soft because they were bentgrass. I think you're going to see this in a lot of places, especially in the South.

**Golfdom: You read my mind on an upcoming question, the bent/bermuda debate in the South. How does a course make this decision? When you're brought in to advise, are there certain elements you look at to make the decision?** **Jones:** Even for regular tournaments you don't want soft and mushy; it's bad for the turf, bad for the game. You get footprints. You really have to have a turf that allows you not to use too much water and still keep it in good shape. You don't want to make the grass alive with overwatering.

Now, the bermudas are a lot better. We couldn't have done this if it were tiffdwarf or 328. We can do it with Champion.

**Golfdom: How would you describe your own style when it comes to designing greens?** **Jones:** They're all different. It usually depends on whom you're designing for and if you're designing for a championship. But there are different ways to make it a championship player... I mean, at Bethpage, those greens are real subtle.

You have to remember, the greens contours protect the hole location, protect the pin as much as a pond, the rough, a bunker. Sometimes people forget that. They don't talk about the greens contours.

**Golfdom: Care to name drop? What are some of your favorite greens out there?**

**Jones:** Oh, boy. I've never even thought of that. ...The third green at Augusta National is a great green because it's a short hole. The seventh hole is also a great green, both are designed as short par 4s, yet both greens really make the holes a challenge. I think the 18th at Congressional (Country Club in Bethesda, Md., site of this year's U.S. Open) is one of the best finishing greens. The greatest greens are the ones that make you make choices.

**Golfdom: Did your dad (Robert Trent Jones Sr.) have any advice he passed down to you on putting greens?**

**Jones:** I think he knew as much about putting greens as anybody because he had the transitions. Oakland Hills greens are mostly Donald Ross. A couple are my dad's. He learned from that. He learned from working at Augusta. He did the 16th green, the 11th green and the 13th green over, and he built the 16th hole. I think he got a lot of advice from Bobby Jones because he was a

family hero. He brought the ideas back from the Old Course at St. Andrews, as far as contours. In today's world of contours, the things Bobby Jones did at Peachtree and Augusta and continued to do at Bellerive, is more essential because the ball goes so far. To protect par, it's the green contours now.

**Golfdom: How good of a putter are you?**

**Jones:** Average. I'm like a lot of people. If I start off well, and I start getting the stroke going well, I do tremendously well. And if I start going bad like (Rory) McIlroy did at the Masters... you miss a few and then you start thinking about it too much.

**Golfdom: Any parting shots for the superintendents out there striving to make their greens great for golfers?**

**Jones:** The main thing is, find the fine line between healthy and moist without overwatering. That's good for everybody. You don't have the disease problems. They're still great surfaces to hit into. You don't have a ballmark that takes a minute to fix.

With these new bermudas and bents, you have to verticut often. It doesn't affect the golfers like it did in the old days, where they'd aerify the heck out of them and they weren't playable for three weeks. Get rid of the thatch, and don't topdress with any material other than what the greens were built with. It chokes off the greens.

The mowing, too, is important. The superintendents, they've got better mowers than they've ever had before, so the equipment is to their advantage.

Every superintendent needs to do what they think is right. Don't listen to the member saying, "I've got the member/guest. I want it 14 on the stimp." If it's going to be 90-something degrees, just do what you think is right. ■