



A Player's Perspective

Who Should The Golf Course Be Maintained For?

By Dr. David Cookson



The argument is raised by some that a golf course should be maintained in a different manner for golfers of varying abilities, and since a golf club has members whose talents cover a wide spectrum, confusion ensues as to which golfer is to be the recipient of the green superintendent's special concern. I would suggest the contrary view that a golf course should be maintained in only one way—to try to achieve the finest conditions for golf play that are possible with the limitations of budget and equipment—and that this result will generally best satisfy the entire golfing membership at any club.

The most important part of the course for proper maintenance are the greens; if the greens are bad, no matter how great the rest of the course is, a golfer will leave the club dissatisfied with the condition and in a hypercritical state of mind. If the greens are exemplary, the same golfer will tend to overlook other parts of the course which may have less than desirable conditions, and feel quite positive about the course. Every golfer wants the green to be smooth, weed free, and without damaged, diseased, or dead turf. The argument then is how fast the green surface should be; some feeling that the average golfer needs a slower green than the expert player. This is fallacious; a golfer of any ability will learn to putt the speed of his home course greens, and all appreciate a ball rolling on a smooth and true surface where a good effort is properly rewarded. No golfer wants to putt on a thick carpet of lush grass where it takes a hit rather than a stroke to putt the ball, and where grain and surface irregularity will confound a properly struck putt. The green does not have to be as fast as the standard at a national championship, but faster greens over the long haul generate far fewer member complaints than do slow greens. A player used to fast greens can adjust to slower greens if he plays at another course much more easily than a player used to slower roll trying to adjust the other way. All golfers want their course to be in top shape, and if the standard of excellence, as measured by conditions existing for the national championships, is not approached, the membership will in time become disenchanted with the efforts of the green superintendent.

Similarly, fairways should be cut short enough that the ball will sit up and not bury in grass too long and weak to hold it up. This is the standard for all golfers of any ability. The worst player cannot hit the ball cleanly if it is not sitting up, as it may well not be with too long fairways. The argument I hear is that if fairways are cut too short, the grass will die under summer heat stress. Whether or not this is true, (and I am highly skeptical that it is, but that is subject for another time), all golfers will tolerate better shorter fairway grass with a few dead spots, than long green fairway grass that they cannot hit the ball out of with any consistency. Tees must be short too; it was never meant that on the tee one should place his ball barely over the tip of the grass blades due to a long cut. No class of golfer wants that, yet I see long grass on tees in my travels; completely unnecessary, and leading to heavy criticism of that particular course's maintenance. Bunkers should of course be carefully tended, weed free, properly cropped edges, with special attention to greenside edges so that players may not putt out. Golfers play the game at least in part for the challenge, and all know that it is not proper to be able to routinely putt out of bunkers. Roughs should be rough; not as too often noted, near extensions of the fairway. The difference in height of cut of a proper rough will add to the aesthetics of the golf round by outlining the hole more effectively, and add to that spice of challenge that players expect. The rough need not be impossible, nor the depth expected in a major championship; but it should be deep enough so that a player of any ability cannot expect to hit on the green as easily as if he were in the fairway. Even a thirty handicapper appreciates that a ball hit on a fairway should be more easily struck than one errant enough to be in the rough, and if he is in a match and in the fairway, he expects to have an easier shot than his opponent who may be in the rough. Golfers expect the rough to be a bigger challenge, and are inwardly miffed if they play a course where it is not.

I believe in any human endeavor one can generate more appreciation for one's efforts by striving to create the best, rather than settling for less than the best. In golf course maintenance the "best" is properly considered the course condition required for a major championship, and criticism of the green superintendent will be a lot less the closer he gets to that standard than it will be if he allows lesser course conditions to prevail in the belief he is satisfying more of the golfing membership. Not only that, the green superintendent can be much happier with himself, knowing that he is striving for excellence and doing the best of which he is capable.