



## Editorial

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# WHAT'S GOIN' ON HERE?

By Monroe S. Miller

To quote Slim Pickens as he came galloping up on horseback in the movie "Blazing Saddles" (definitely **not** a celluloid classic!), "What in the wide, wide world of sports is goin' on here?" Maybe I should amend this to read, "What in the wide, wide, world of GOLF is goin' on here?" I'm asking the question in the context of putting green speed and the continually lowered heights of cut. My answer, simply stated, is "enough is enough."

Pressing forward (or downward) has been a game in our business for too long, and I cannot help but feel that we should call it a "draw" before it's too late; we are rapidly approaching the point where no one — not the golf players and not the Superintendents — can be declared a winner. It is true that the game of "who has the fastest greens in town" has given players quicker putting surfaces than they had five or seven or ten years ago. But it is also true that this increased putting speed has a heavy cost — more money for fungicides, frequent topdressing, hand watering, double cutting, etc. Ridiculously fast greens can also be credited (or blamed) for adding to the slow play problem of golf. Some estimates say that they have added fifteen minutes per 18 hole round. And, as one player pointed out to me, it costs additional strokes and even more time in worrying about putting slick greens. How do these factors add to the enjoyment of a round of golf? Are the players really benefitting, in essence "winning," this game of fast grass? I submit that we have reached the point where careful evaluation by all concerned is needed.

An incident happened to me two years ago that precipitated more deliberate thought on this issue. One of my favorite members and his wife, who are both very good

players, flagged me down one summer afternoon as they were waiting to play away on the 17th tee. The previous day they had been guests at one of the finer golf clubs in the state and had come away disgusted and frustrated (as were the host members). "The greens were as fast as this bench," he said, as he rapped his driver on the bench seat. "It was ridiculous and absolutely no fun," and he added, "I hope you don't get anymore involved in this foolishness of seeing how fast you can make our greens." My colleague definitely had faster greens, but not better greens. And these kinds of comments are not uncommon.

Golf Course Managers are crowding their luck to the point of losing this game, too. Lowered heights of cut on green surfaces directly correlate with a reduced root mass, and this in turn reflects back to thinned, unhealthy and sometimes dead grass. Lowered heights of cut reduce leaf tissue and lead to a concomitant reduction in photosynthetic potential — less CHO in the plant systems. These two factors of stress narrow the fine line we walk in managing putting greens. And increased plant stress can be manifest in major problems in just keeping putting greens alive during the weather extremes of Wisconsin's hot and humid summers. Is the golf course with the fastest greens really winning this silly game?

Dr. David Roberts foretold of a bad moon on the rise when he addressed us at our Quit-Oui-Oc meeting last year. He basically said that continued mowing at such low heights of cut on putting greens greatly increases the chances of bacterial wilt infection. His message was clear and no one should have to be hit over the head with a 2" x 4" to realize how devastating this problem could be.

The winner of the speed battle could end up losing the war of maintaining a quality golf course. Dr. Joe Duich has publicly expressed similar opinions about low heights of cut.

And if time is money, then a lot of money is being spent, maybe even wasted, in adapting equipment to accomplish the task of cutting at 1/8" — 1/10". Shaving bed knives, adjusting units on a triplex to cut at the same height when the margin of difference is so small yet noticeable, and multiple mowings on the same day all require an inordinate amount of staff time. I question whether these reflect time and money well spent, and I have to believe we've reached the point of diminishing returns.

I probably shouldn't say this, but the "game" has led to a new pet peeve — false bravado. Somehow or other, green speed, in the minds of some, translates into quality. Ergo faster grass means better golf course. The logic then follows foolishly to "better golf course means better management." And how aggravating it is to see someone — whether it is a club member or club golf professional or green committee chairman or the Superintendent — strut around like a banty rooster bragging that "our greens are faster than yours." It gets so bad sometimes that individuals involved in this frivolous and irresponsible braggadocio seem to correlate their manhood with how fast their greens are. Ego overwhelms common sense! Some of those involved believe, wrongly, that it takes a towering mental giant to shave the foliage from putting greens to provide slickness. It definitely takes courage, but not genius. It could, however, take even more than brains to successfully overcome the damage that could result. Help! I cannot take anymore!

The problem as I perceive it really gets out of whack when tournament time rolls around. Frequently, when a player participates in a tournament held at his own course, he barely recognizes what he thought was a familiar track. The fast greens of everyday play are pushed to the limit of extreme. Greens are allowed to dry out to the end point of stress. They are double and triple cut preceding and during the tournament.

Weighted rollers and compacters are brought on. Grassed putting surfaces become more like paved parking lots. Shots don't hold, the ball rolls forever and frequently off the surface, and carefully designed contours are meaningless. And all of this is for more challenging golf? Nonsense. If other sports followed our practices, then football fields would be lengthened 50 yards and goal posts raised five feet for any championship game. Host ball parks for the World Series would have to extend outfield fences goodly distances and then raise them ten feet. Wimbledon tennis championships would have to raise the net 12 inches and shorten the court. The mile run would be at a mile and a sixteenth. So on and so on, ad nauseam. But other sports don't change the field of play and I am not sure that we should be either. Tournament preparation has gone beserk; absurd increases in green speed for tournaments should be outlawed!

Defining a problem is easy. Offering solution(s) is more difficult, but here are some possibilities:

(1) Let's start with an idea that has the least merit. To satiate

those with the lust for claiming the "fastest grass in the West" I propose a one day event. We'll select and train a group of impartial judges (non-golfers) on the proper use of the stimp meter. They'll follow all USGA guidelines. On the given day, all greens on courses that desire participation will be read for speed. The results will be tabulated. A winner will be declared and we will present an engraved loving cup. Egos will be assuaged. Then we can all get back to the more important task of providing true and smooth and consistent putting greens. No one will have to be concerned with whose greens are the fastest — the winner for the year will have been declared.

Any takers for this plan?

(2) A giant step to modifying the competition for the fastest greens in town would be to require all participants in the game to be honest. When greens are **too** fast, golfers should say so. Of course, golf is a gentleman's game and no one

wants to risk offending a host or the Superintendent or the green committee. We should change that. Frustrated or embarrassed players should not have to come up with phrases like "severe but fair" or "we all played the same greens" or any other lies — bad lies, usually. There is something amiss when all of the thrills on fast greens are par putts, and truly skilled players are reduced to duffers.

(3) Let's insist on letting common sense prevail; agronomic principles should be considered in determining speed. The proper perspective of the game needs recapturing — we must not forget the game. Let us keep in mind the intent of the architect when subtle contours were designed into putting greens. And let's all work to put forth the best playing conditions, not the fastest greens.

I'm changing my attitude. Fast isn't best. Isn't it about time to slow this trend of fast grass down a little bit?

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