

A Player's Perspective

AUTUMN REFLECTIONS

By Dr. David U. Cookson



As part of my involvement with golf, I have found myself in nearly every part of the country this past summer. Travel is broadening, and some conclusions I have drawn will serve for this issue's article.

Golf course maintenance throughout the nation continues to be highly variable. Overwhelmingly the major problem is maintaining good quality putting surfaces and fairway turf, be it bentgrass or *Poa annua* which is being nurtured. Most of the country persists in overwatering, thereby compounding the problems caused this year by difficult weather conditions, and despite the solid evidence and extensive discussion that excessive water use is counter productive. We in Wisconsin are way ahead of most in recognizing this, and this year our golf courses reflected this in comparison with elsewhere. It was instructive to visit bentgrass greens both in Arizona and Florida in August; the greens thriving in Arizona in 110 degrees heat with irrigation only every 3-4 days (light syringing in-between but not every day), and nearly totally dead bentgrass in Florida with clear oversaturation with water, but temperatures 15 degrees less than Arizona (although more humid). In the Chicago area, golfers were playing on muddy fairways (even before the excessive rains) and badly stressed greens, yet here in Wisconsin with the same or less favorable weather, turf was surviving surprisingly well—with much less water. Even in the Northeast, where the concept of

sparing water is only recently being accepted, turf conditions were better than last year, at clubs where I played both years, despite more stress to the grass plant this year weather wise; and obviously this is related to the less water being applied.

All over the country golf courses are more difficult to score on because of the recent and rapidly evolving practice of only a narrow fringe of closely mown turf surrounding the green, then this bordered by deep bluegrass or bermuda rough. This idea was a rarity even 15 years ago, but now is pretty much the norm at most private clubs. This year particularly I was struck by how many more clubs had begun this practice, I suppose in response to the way courses are set up for the major championship. Fairways too are generally narrower than heretofore, and green speed is up a bit as well. A deplorable situation, I think, is the continued too frequent practice, not confined to Wisconsin, of shirking routine golf course maintenance after Labor Day. The excuse I hear is that "all our crew is back in school", or "we are too busy with fall projects", but I maintain these factors are irrelevant—an effective and efficient green superintendent can find the time to keep bunkers maintained, change cups frequently, and keep putting greens mowed—the basis of good golf course management—despite a lesser crew. Far too many times this fall I played top ranked golf courses, which I know were immaculate in June, where basic maintenance was overlooked or ignored in September and October.

My last overriding observation on playing all kinds of courses this year is that new is not usually better, relating specifically to course design. Current golf course architects too often in large

part seem more interested in making a personal statement than providing an enjoyable, fair, stimulating, and esthetically pleasing golf course, which integrates with its natural surroundings. We are being overwhelmed with artificiality and gimmickry in golf course design; the "Scottish look" in terrain that bears no resemblance to Scotland and is grotesquely out of place where it is utilized; placing water hazards way out of proportion to good design principles, and again emphasizing artificial materials and design at the expense of the natural beauty of the terrain. Exotic bushes, flowers, and grasses are placed where they are inappropriate, and nearly universally the golfer is confronted by ridiculous green slopes, mounding, and shapes, which clearly makes the course more difficult, but rarely more strategic; and leaves the impression of contrived and even "Mickey Mouse". I played many new and tremendously spectacular golf courses this past year, with design characteristics seemingly built in by architects to try to make the golfing public comment about the course and thereby enhance the designers' assumed expertise; but I did not play very many new honest, good golf courses that satisfy the soul of the golfer for the inherent marriage of good shot values and esthetically pleasing natural design. I think examples of the good are Lake Arrowhead, and the new holes at Medinah, and I urge all who are able to take in some of the Senior Open at Medinah next summer to see what good and honest golf course design really is. I am more fully convinced each year that we in Wisconsin are blessed with golf facilities of very high rank, comparing most favorably with other courses nationwide.

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