



“REFLECTIONS...”

By Dr. David U. Cookson

Once a year I try to think of a subject for this column that might be interesting, or provocative, or both; and sometimes (but not always) I succeed. This time I shall explore certain misconceptions and complaints I hear relating to one of the subjects I most closely relate to — golf course maintenance.

Green speed and green surface firmness are always subjects for discussion. It is obvious to me that in any group of golfers, no consensus will ever be attained on these subjects. One player's ideal green speed is certainly too fast or too slow for a large number of other golfers who feel entirely differently. In general, low handicappers prefer faster greens, since a well struck ball will roll precisely and good touch will be well rewarded. Contrariwise, either the unfortunate golfer afflicted with the yips, or often the higher handicap player who plays less often, sees fast greens as unfair, since he or she cannot ever get tuned to the delicate touch these surfaces require. I deal with these points of view all year, and conclude they cannot be reconciled. I submit then that the playing surfaces of any game are best prepared so that the most skill is generally rewarded, which means fast, true

greens. Golf is a game on continually trying to achieve perfection, and that means learning to putt greens the way they are prepared for championship play. On the other hand, greens too fast, or more commonly, placing holes on slopes where roll is excessive, takes the skill out of the game for all players, and this type of zeal to achieve top green speed or difficulty in competitions is to be deplored. I feel ideal green speed is 10 feet to 10½ feet on the stimpmeter, unless the greens slope excessively, when 9 feet to 9½ feet is more reasonable. These are the general speeds in the USGA competitions I attend each summer, and are well accepted by the contestants. I have observed this ideal cannot be obtained when there is too much water on the greens, either from heavy rains,

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too much irrigation, or high humidity; and those golfers who complain of slow greens during these kinds of situations should recognize that weather circumstances may not allow the necessary ideal speed to be attained on a specific day.

A corollary to the green speed controversy is green surface firmness. Most golfers I listen to feel that greens are too hard most of the time. I think this is because we are used to the years of overwatering of greens in Wisconsin (thankfully now being corrected at most clubs) where each shot to a green nearly plugged in its own mark, and of course stopped relatively quickly. Keeping greens this wet all the time is counterproductive; green compaction is exaggerated, the turf is more prone to disease and is weakened, and green speed suffers. Moreover, I submit that most shots that do not hold on a green are poorly hit balls, usually of two piece construction and surlyn cover, that just cannot “sit down” as well as a balata covered ball will. We older players grew up with balata balls that stopped much more quickly, and now when most balls are surlyn, and consequently do not stop as promptly, we blame the green surface itself for a condition that has much more to do with the nature of the ball. This is of course aggravated if greens are small, as they are at many of our older Wisconsin courses. Still, a good player who hits the ball more precisely, can stop a ball of either type on a firm surface (I don't mean hard and baked — nobody wants that). Again, no green

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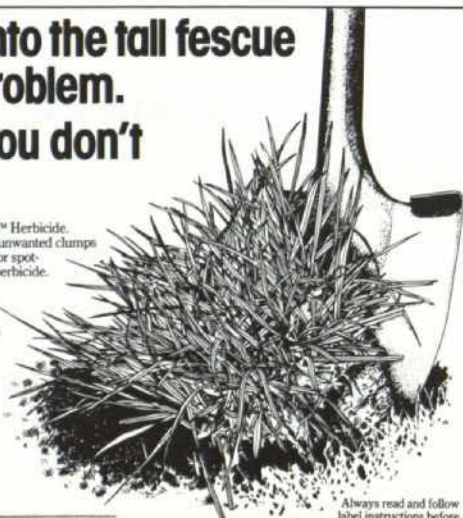
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will easily accept a ball hit with a strong following wind, and particularly if the greens are small they will not hold as well as the hard covered ball. Finally, in Wisconsin, on older courses with small native soil greens with a large amount of clay in the subsoil, it is more difficult to stop a ball. These circumstances require a commitment to a good sand top dressing program carried out for a number of years, (it has done wonders at my course), and at such clubs concerned players should think about returning to use of the balata covered ball. Excessive watering of these greens to make them soft, will only aggravate the problems of increased compaction, a self-defeating process which already occurs far too often. Lastly, the problem of the ball rolling over the green is compounded by the recent trend to keep rough up to the collars of greens, markedly increasing the difficulty of the hole. In this situation, perhaps the green committee could consider modifying the difficulty that this situation presents.

The other golf course maintenance practice I hear about all the time is bunker sand — either too soft or too hard. I play at two Wisconsin courses, one

where the sand is generally too soft, and the other where it is generally been too hard (although it is being changed), and it is obvious to me that golfers get used to playing out of one kind of sand and object strenuously if they come across different bunker conditions elsewhere. This circumstance is compounded by the fact that bunker play demands more skill than ordinary shots from off a green, and if a player mishits it, he will blame the bunker sand before he blames himself. Generally the sand available to us in Wisconsin is decent sand, but I think it gets too hard in large part because of frequent green watering, which every day tends to compact the adjacent bunker sand if, as usual, the water system catches the bunkers as well as the greens. The solution here is obvious, either water less, or earlier so that there is more time for the sand to dry out before play begins, or make bunker maintenance more of a priority than some Green Superintendents have made it. Some courses have tried to solve this problem by pouring in more new sand, which then at first causes plugged lies and difficult conditions until this sand too compacts. Often the apparent pres-

ence of too much sand is due to raking practices which try to make bunker faces look more orderly, putting very loose sand under the lip, leading to the worst bunker condition, the plugged lie under the lip. I support the point of view that ideally bunker sand will never be so loose that the ball can bury completely below the surface. I think this can be accomplished by paying more attention to bunker maintenance and particularly how the bunker plays, rather than how beautiful it might appear on a colored photograph. Still, in the end, the player himself should learn how to play out of both loose and compacted sand, since the ideal situation is both unlikely to be consistently attained at your own club, and because uniformity of bunker sands comparing one course with another will never happen.

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