



SPINNERS and FLYERS: A Golfer's "A-grass-ive" Approach

By Eugene R. Haas
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I'm very pleased for this opportunity to discuss the tantalizing topic of "Watching Grass Grow."

It appears that I have the enormous privilege of joining a most elite group of legendary forerunners who have been called upon to address this august group—such as: Messrs. *Wayne Otto; Rod Johnson; Bill Knight; Ray Knapp; Roger Bell; Monroe Miller and Danny "Ha Ha-I've run two major USGA Championships" Quast.* I've also noticed a few other people who have spent a little time in the game who have made a few comments to this group, such as, *P.J. Boatwright, Jr.; Frank Hannigan; Dennis Tiziani; Carl Unis; Pete Dye; Andy North; Harold Sargent* and certainly my dear friend *Gordon Watson.* I'm sure you have run across their names somewhere along the way. Also, I've heard that the original sought after "Golf-Experts" who were to have filled this speaking-spot were unable to attend due to prior commitments—*Don Johnson,* the executive director of the Western Golf Association and a former WSGA president, had to attend a Mai-Tai testing tournament held at the Grand Cypress Resort in Orlando, FL. So he couldn't be here; *Peter DeYoung,* the WGA's tournament director, received a dozen titleist golfballs from the venerable *Artie Weller* and therefore, requested to see how fast he could lose them at Bonita Bay G.C. in Naples, FL; *Manuel De La Torre,* head pro at Milwaukee C.C., begged off because it's been rumored that he is taking up the new winter sport of bowling—and he needed the practice; *Steve Stricker,* the 1990 Wisconsin State Open Champion, couldn't make it because he's volunteered to chauffeur *Dennis Tiziani* back and forth from Cherokee C.C. to his golf cart business—naturally, Tiz's daughter *Nickki* has to accompany them. At the last count I've been informed that the speaker's search committee went through over 30 different candidates—and came up empty. *Rod Johnson* mentioned that I really was first in his mind, but they just wanted

to test the field for a moment. . . gosh, for a moment I thought they might ask the *Magic Man* to fill in, but I'm sure your group couldn't afford him.

The overriding question that I have been asked to consider is. . . "What type of grass enables the golfer to perform to their best ability? Is it bluegrass, fescue, ryegrass, quackgrass, crabgrass, buffalo grass, tall grass, short grass, straight grass, bent grass, Zoisa grass, Washington grass, Toronto grass, Penncross, Penneagle, Penn anything, Pennsylvania 6-5000, . . . or, just plain ole. . . "Golfer's Grass"? This species happens to be anything that allows a golf shot to go dead straight with the proper amount of spin enabling a golf ball to come to a quick stop whenever it comes within the "gimme" range of the flag stick!

I guess I probably have the opportunity to see more competitive golf shots struck in the state of Wisconsin than anyone else. . . and, believe me, many of them don't have a thing to do with whatever type of grass they were hit from. In fact, some of them can only be described as just plain old "rotten" golf shots, usually very much to the embarrassment of the author. Every once in a while a shot struck by a very prominent player will result in a most strange orbital phenomenon, such as a low lateral movement commonly referred to as the shameful shank; or, a quick snipe called a "Quack-Quack"—or, the dreadful "Duck-Hook." Instantaneously, what usually follows is a guttural response coming forth from both the striker and any spectators present—sounding somewhat like. . . , "What the hell was that?" Then, it's usually followed up with a facial smirk featuring confusion, or, in some instances, a profane four-lettered testimony of physical ineptitude, or on rare occasions, a temperamental display of aerial proficiency in exhibiting the whirling techniques of a helicopter propeller designed to simulate a golfing implement.

Sometimes a golf shot can be related directly to the "lie" of the ball, or

to the type of grass that the ball lies upon. Most of us know, or think we know, that wide-bladed grasses, especially reaching lengths of 2" or more, can possibly render a condition known as a "flyer lie." That condition is caused by grass interfering with the face of a golf club and the sphere intended to be hit, which disallows a golf ball from being cleanly struck. . . which in turn, is supposed to impart a specified degree of spin on the ball giving the golfer a certain degree of control. When this interference takes place, a ball will depart the club face with very little spin—thereby, allowing the ball to travel much further through the air, usually, beyond the player's intended length of the shot—hence, a "flyer."

When fairways contain grasses other than bent and are not maintained properly, meaning that they are not cut to "desired" heights at frequent intervals, the golfer is more likely to inherit lies that do not afford him the degree of control that he would enjoy—hence, the susceptibility to the dreaded "flyer."

In recent years there has been a trend to convert existing fairways to bentgrass or experimental grass combinations that allow controlled desirable mowing heights, which in turn, enables the golfer to generate better contact with the ball, which usually results in a controlled "spin-shot" that behaves in accordance with the golfer's desires. This conversion is rapidly expanding throughout the country, even to the public links sector. In many cases mowing methods are being altered, using lightweight mowing equipment on a much more frequent basis. Obviously, maintenance costs are increasing rapidly, thus, causing playing costs to rise concurrently.

It is generally accepted that the golfer of today is considered to be more "sophisticated." Or at least he thinks he is more sophisticated. With sophistication comes many things—usually a lightening of the wallet.

Nevertheless, it appears that the golfer, especially the competitive golfer, is demanding these qualities. With the territory—comes the price. So far, it seems that the golfer is willing to pay the price. Golfers are now apt to make more comparisons than ever before. Their “standards” rise annually, especially as more and more of the “super-courses” are being developed. Though these courses are extremely expensive to play, the golfer uses them as his guide to “standardization,” and he becomes more and more vocal about his “regular” golfing facility. How many times we witness some of the golfers holding “court” and talking about how nice the conditions were at “XYZ” golf course . . . and, why couldn’t “our” golf course be taken care of like that one. Apparently, when this type of conversation takes place, the other golf course always happens to be the “standard” one. I guess that it’s necessary for all golf course owners and operators to take a good, hard look at their golf course and listen a little to the people who play it . . . not the “bitching”, but the constructive comments offered.

It appears to me that this “up-swing” in golf playing characteristics is a reality and is with us. The course that fails to recognize this need to “upgrade” will not share in the continued growth that is being forecast for our industry. In fact, there is the danger that a decline in golf activity could be felt by the course that remains complacent. I believe this attitude is being felt by some of the municipal courses that haven’t dealt with the times, which includes upgrading.

One of the positive benefits that upgrading can bring forth is the justification in raising the price “. . . to play upon the product.” Most golfers recognize the inflationary trend of the “ideal”—which is commonly referred to as . . . “The American Way.” But whenever increases are not reflected by improvements, he’s likely to rebel. If constant improvements in playability are evident—naturally followed by increases in the price to play—the golfer usually is supportive and willing to pay an acceptable, justifiable increase. Hopefully, this increase will not only absorb the additional expense involved in upgrading, but will afford a more realistic return to the owner/operator on his investment.

I have been directly involved in guiding the affairs of the Wisconsin State Golf Association for 14 years now.

Prior to that I spent 17 years in the public links sector, conducting tournaments and administering the affairs of and for the public links players of Wisconsin. I recall the first time that I passed through the entrance gate of the hallowed Milwaukee Country Club. It was to witness and give encouragement to the invited public players who were participating in the 1960 WSGA State Amateur Championship. I was watching four or five public links players, in particular—Jim Levenhagen of Greenfield Park and Bob Mueller, Allan Daeda and Archie Dadian of Whitnall Park. Each of them had easily qualified for match play, and they were embraced in individual competition when I arrived upon the scene. I hastily parked my car and raced to the first tee to catch some of the action. As I prepared to follow my very close friend, the late Bob Mueller, I walked down the hill in front of the first tee approaching the first fairway. As soon as I stepped upon the magnificently groomed bentgrass fairway I stopped and immediately the thought entered my mind to remove my shoes. After all, this was the custom that my meticulous mother had established in our home whenever we were about to enter our carpeted front parlor. This fairway at Milwaukee CC was the finest piece of prepared turf that I had ever seen . . . or, set foot upon. I remember reaching down and fingering through the finely groomed, plush strands of grass. I was truly mesmerized by it all—I had never seen such plushness before. Boy, if I could ever have the opportunity to play upon fairways this fine I’d pay whatever it would take—maybe even up to \$5.00! After all, I was paying 90 cents for an 18 hole permit at Whitnall Park at that time.

I also watched other legendary players who were participating in that event, hall of famers . . . Harry Simonson, Steve Caravello, Bob Brue, Dick Sucher and eventual champion Steve Smith. I noticed that whenever any of them would fire shots onto Milwaukee CC’s satin-smooth greens, as they would take one bounce and come to an abrupt halt or even virgorously spin backwards. I just had never seen a golf ball consistently react like this before, at least not at Whitnall or Greenfield Park. Later on, as I had the opportunity to play at a high-quality country club, I too was able to generate golf shots that reacted similarly when they landed on the green. As I became more knowledgeable about the game I

realized that the closely manicured fairway grass was the leading contributor to the stop-spin action of a well-struck golf shot.

One other incident comes to my mind relating to fairway conditions and how they involve the expert player. In 1964 the Joseph Schlitz Brewing Co. sponsored an exhibition at the Brown Deer Park G.C., featuring Arnold Palmer, Gary Player, Doug Sanders and I believe Doug Ford. I was an official for that event and I remember the participants meeting with a group of Schlitz people and a group of officials prior to tee-off. They unanimously requested and received permission to play “Winter Rules.” Gary Player vigorously exclaimed that he wouldn’t be able to execute the shots to “entertain” the spectators, of which there were about 10,000, without improving the lie. Apparently, he knew what he was talking about because he established a then course record of 66 that day. Palmer shot 71 and Sanders had a 72. I don’t remember what the other score was.

I do vividly recall that one of Brown Deer Park’s stalwart members of the men’s club yelled out to Gary Player on the 13th hole, something like . . . “Hey Player, you’re nothing but a ‘cop-out’ fraud professional for not owning up to playing the ball down; we public links players here at Brown Deer always play it down when we play every day in our outings.” Player looked over at me and asked if I knew the guy who was harassing him. I said, “Yes,” and Player said, “Then, why don’t you go over and tell him to ‘shut-up.’” So, I walked over and told Mr. Al Roth to keep his comments about the golf course to himself. I won’t mention to you what Mr. Roth responded to me.

I guess the point that I’m trying to make is that even professional players expect to have conditions that best enable them to display their talents. Peter DeYoung, the WGA tournament director, commented to me recently that years ago he had difficulty in getting the top players to enter the Western Open before they moved the event to the fantastic Butler National GC. Some of the courses that they used before that did not have the fairway quality that these players required. This only goes to show that as a player’s ability improves, their requirements become a lot more selective.

In summation, I would go on record to state that the competitive golfer is actually searching for improved play-

ing conditions and is willing to pay the price, assuming that it is justifiable and affordable. The casual golfer and the "sophisticated dude" who passes himself off as a golfer, appear to be already supporting the "super-tracks." Just count the cars in the parking lots of Blackwolf Run GC, Sentryworld GC, and the soon to open Geneva Lakes GC, then look at Pebble Beach, PGA West and the Florida syndrome.

So, my suggestion to those of you who have some input into the direction that your facility may be exploring is to "think positive." Go bent if possible! But upgrade for sure!

EDITOR'S NOTE: Gene Haas first presented these thoughts as a speaker at the 1990 Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium. They are reproduced here with Gene's permission.



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