



# Putting on the Edge of Disaster

By Jerry Tarde

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Once again, I've been reminded of what fine people work in the game of golf. In my task of seeking permission to reprint the following article (you'll love it!), I had the chance to visit with a very nice person. Delores Siletto is the licensing manager for GOLF DIGEST magazine.*

*I called her at the magazine's Trumbull, Connecticut office. She told me that they rarely allow reprint of their articles; on those rare occasions when they do grant that permission, they also charge a significant fee. As you can imagine, the number of such requests they get is nearly enormous.*

*However, she suggested I put my request in writing and send it to her, along with a couple of back issues of THE GRASS ROOTS. She assured me she would carefully consider the request.*

*What a treat it was to come home from the GCSAA conference to a letter from Delores. She gave us permission to reproduce Mr. Tarde's article in this issue of THE GRASS ROOTS.*

*So sit back, read one golfer's opinion of fast greens and remember that thanks are due to Delores Siletto.*

When old Bill Fownes wanted to check the green speed at Oakmont, he would walk out to the second hole and carefully drop a ball on the back of the putting surface. If it didn't roll down the slope, off the front of the green and into the fairway, he would tell the grounds crew to cut and roll the green again.

At least that is according to Oakmont lore. For most of this century, Oakmont has set the standard against which all other top clubs measure their green speeds. Now comes new evidence from architect Pete Dye that green speed in the old days may be wildly exaggerated.

Dye has had motion pictures of the 1962 U.S. Open at Oakmont studied by mathematical experts. Analyzing the time lapse of putts rolling across the greens, they have concluded that Oakmont's speeds back then were "about 8 on the Stimpmeter," what today is considered relatively slow.

If true, Dye's discovery is important because it might curb the chase for

faster greens, golf's costly equivalent of the arms race. "The USGA is trying to raise \$10 million to find hardier turf," says Dye. "All they've got to raise is the mowers, 1/16th of an inch."

But golfers persist in the mistaken belief that faster is better. And just as mistakenly, club members argue that their greens were faster back in the '50s and '60s. Most agronomists agree that this is not possible, and USGA Green Section National Director Jim Snow cites four innovations that have greatly added speed in recent times:

- It's only been in the last 15 years that clubs cut greens seven days a week; they used to be cut every other day, a big change.

- Cutting greens at 3/16ths was considered very close and 1/4th of an inch was common until the 1970s; the introduction of thinner bedknives (against which the rotary blades of mowers cut) allowed greens to be scalped below 1/8th of an inch.

- Clubs used to top-dress greens once or twice a year; now they do it lightly every three weeks.

- And until the 1970s, we didn't have verticutters and groomers, new ma-

chinery that takes the excess top growth off the leaves of grass.

But the real culprit is a yard-long metal rod known as the Stimpmeter, which was developed to quantify green speed. When it was introduced in the mid-'70s, the USGA surveyed more than 1,500 greens in 36 states and found that the average roll was 6 feet 6 inches on the Stimpmeter. "It's crept up over the years until the average is closer to 8 today, and 9 feels slow to some people," says Snow.

The result has been higher expenses for maintenance of weaker turf that's more susceptible to disease. Several years ago in the Midwest, dozens of country clubs noticed that their bentgrass greens were dying of bacteria known as C15 Decline, while the greens at neighboring daily-fee and municipal courses were unaffected. Turf-types began calling it "Rich Man's Disease," because it only hit the wealthy courses like Muirfield Village and Butler National, where the greens were cut too low.

"Trying to maintain consistently fast greens means always living on the edge of disaster," says Snow.

Some classic, old courses have now increased their speeds to the point that severely undulating greens are unputtable. Then members argue the greens have "settled" over time and now need to be rebuilt. Of course, all they need to do is play the greens at the speed they were designed for.

Now some courses are starting to post their green speeds on lockerroom bulletin boards. This only encourages idiotic competition among clubs for the fastest greens in town and leads macho golfers to demand higher numbers or the super's job.

Longtime turf authority Al Radko says good putting begins at 7 feet 6 inches. And for everyday play, it should not get above 9.

The PGA Tour aims to have its greens at around 10 feet, and the U.S. Open shoots for 10 to 11½ feet. But those are once-a-year occasions, with the host club's maintenance program targeted for tournament week.

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