

The Anticipation Theory

By Peter Nomm, PGA General Manager & Head Golf Professional, Minocqua Country Club

Without question, one of the most talked about aspect of course maintenance is the speed of the greens. As a PGA golf professional, I am afforded the opportunity to read many publications written to the turf management industry, and it too is a hot topic among superintendents. Various theories about height-of-cut, rolling, growth regulators, etc., all are blended by each superintendent in his quest to satisfy the desires of those that play his facility. It is truly both an art and a science!

Anyone that plays golf or is at all involved in the industry recognizes that this is an opinionated topic. Unfortunately for those in the business of turf health, slow greens are a perceived "black-eye" on a superintendent. The most scrutinized part of a golf course by the average golfer is the greens, and most often it is the speed of the greens that is remembered. Whether we like it or not, it is this reality – the golfer's perception – that affects the overall success of what we do. No matter what the environmental effects are on our course conditions, or how well we educate golfers, it still boils down to their perception and enjoyment which ultimately leads them to choose to play our facilities.

Which leads me to the subject of this article – why is speed such a concern? Golf is certainly a hard enough game without the added variables such as weather and differing course conditions. Golfers want to know what to expect. Have you ever watched someone whistle a bunker shot over the green? The first thing he will do is scrape the sand with his wedge and grumble that there was no sand in that bunker. Well, that might have been true, but bunkers are hazards, are they not? Now that's another favorite topic of mine, but enough of that for this article!

Consistent conditions give golfers the opportunity to try to achieve their expectations – even in a bunker as I alluded to above, the golfer has a perception as to

how the shot will play. When conditions vary, as conditions SHOULD, it adds to the challenge. This same concept goes for the speed on the greens. When the golfer can anticipate consistent speed of the greens, he gives himself a better chance to perform well. Putting well leads to playing well, which leads to greater enjoyment. Certain-

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ly from an agronomic point of view, consistency goes hand-in-hand with proper maintenance. Greens are typically mowed on a daily basis, perhaps rolled on a schedule, and are given consistent attention to keep these highly-sensitive plants healthy. But still, even if greens are consistent, then why do golfers also expect them to be fast?

I could argue a couple points in favor of slower greens. For one, I believe slower greens are easier to putt. With slow greens, you just "bang it to the hole and tap it in."

It is easier to control your distance, which is the real key in putting. It doesn't matter nearly as much as to whether you are above or below the hole. Slower greens will "roll-out" much less than on faster greens, making the second putts much easier than on faster greens. This is why

we see the major championships on TV played typically on faster greens – it is the tournament's desire to challenge the best golfers by providing the most difficult conditions.

There is another reason in favor of slower greens – pace-of-play. Now I know it sounds like an odd relation, but with my

point above about slower greens being easier to putt, you have much less time spent "grinding" over those four and five foot comeback putts that are so prevalent on fast greens. Slower greens will give the golfer more "tap-ins," also contributing to better pace-of-play. Why do tournaments take so much longer to play than an average round of golf? It has a lot to do with the speed of the greens – they are typically sped up for tournaments, making for more time spent on the greens.

So with all these wonderful reasons to have slower greens (not to mention plant health), why do golfers, including myself, really enjoy faster greens? Besides the meaningless bragging rights of one course to another, I believe that "The Anticipation Theory" is the real reason behind it. What is the theory? It is the amount of time the golfer has to react to the putt. Faster greens enable the golfer more time to anticipate the success of a particular putt – once you hit a putt, your mind will have all sorts of reactions such as this:

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"Ooooh, that felt good.....wait, it's drifting a little right.....ahh, it is coming back.....hurry up, get there.....c'mon, c'mon, c'mon.....YES!"

Notorious CBS golf announcer Gary McCord estimates the distance of long putts in time, not feet, when making calls on the air. I have heard him numerous times call a putt a "fourteen-second" – and that's a lot of time to anticipate! With slow greens, by the time you have a moment to look up, the ball is either in the hole or is missed.

"The Anticipation Theory" is a big part of the fun golfers have on the course. Drives that hang in the air, iron shots that

feel great and keep tracking to the pin, and even wayward shots that we keep begging to just stay out of the water – these are all examples of memorable moments golfers experience. But unfortunately, with these examples, golfers that don't hit the ball far do not get to experience these very often. However, on a reasonably fast putting green, golfers of all levels can enjoy the anticipation of a great putt. And knowing that golfers of all levels will be playing our course, adding to their enjoyment is paramount.

Obviously, there is a point at which a green can be too fast. When golfers are afraid to hit a putt – when they are worried about how far a putt will travel past

the hole – that is no fun either. Greens that range around 10 on the stimp-meter (I hope that is not a bad word!) are more than able to provide golfers with the time to enjoy their shots around the green. And the more golfers can enjoy being on the course the more they will want to come back. Our jobs, whether in the golf shop, in the clubhouse, or out with the crew, is to attract and retain customers. Doing everything we can to make each golfer have the best experience each time he or she visits our facility is what makes us successful in what we do. So watch for this next time you get on the course yourself – see how "The Anticipation Theory" adds to the fun you have on the links! 



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