

Is the USGA “Two-Faced” When It Comes to Course Maintenance?

By JAMES F. MOORE, Director
USGA Green Section
Mid-Continent Region

For those of you who do not frequent Turfbyte (an electronic bulletin board for golf course superintendents lucky enough to have PCs equipped with modems), there has been a fair amount of lively discussion lately concerning the condition of Pebble Beach's greens during the U.S. Open Championship. Since Turfbyte regulars are predominantly superintendents, the discussion centered around the turf conditions and the obvious stress on the greens during the last few days of the Championship. The USGA was the target of some pretty stinging criticism, the most serious of which in my mind was the feeling that we (the USGA) are “two-faced” in our recommendations to clubs across the country. The argument was basically, how can the Green Section agronomists visit clubs and emphasize the need to avoid excessively low mowing to produce extremely fast greens, and then hold the Open Championship on television with exactly those conditions on display for the whole world to see?

Having been a superintendent at one time and having worked at a club where green speed was a frequent issue, I fully understand the argument these guys are making. It is a pain when a championship the caliber of an Open is on TV and the low handicappers in your club all decide they ought to putt on greens just as fast. (Actually, The Masters was always my biggest headache since it took place at a time of the year my course was trying to recover from whatever winter damage had been suffered. I didn't even know the superintendent at Augusta National but I sure hated the guy who prepared a course that was “perfect” and on TV while the greenest thing on my course was the

Poa annua that I missed with the spray rig that winter.) It is a difficult situation when players at the local club think they ought to be playing on the same conditions they see on TV.

Generally, the superintendents on Turfbyte agreed that efforts should be made to let non-superintendents know more about what goes on behind the scenes and why, what is seen on TV, is not “the real world.” I happen to agree with them and feel at least three major issues deserve discussion in this regard.

ISSUE #1

“Why does the USGA make the course so hard, the greens so fast, the rough so high? Why are they trying to embarrass the players?”

Chances are you've heard these questions although they were probably expressed more as accusations.

I can't say I have been around a lot of championships in my eight years in the USGA. However, I have been to a few and know many of the people responsible for conducting the events. My observations are that the single most important goal of a USGA championship has in every case been to identify the best player. Do people really believe there are secret meetings behind USGA doors where staffers decide to embarrass somebody? I think it is more possible that the USGA feels more strongly than others that par is still a great round of golf.

One of the best analogies (I love analogies) I have heard concerning the Open setup is comparing this national golf championship to the country's auto racing championship—the Indianapolis 500. Can you imagine a 500 where there was a speed limit of

55 mph? Would you be able to find out who the best driver was under such limitations?

ISSUE #2

Non-championship golfers think they want championship conditions.

It is understandable that players want the same conditions they see on TV. After all, they emulate every other aspect of the best players including their clubs, shoes, swing and style of shirt. However, there are some very large assumptions made when this emulation is carried on to course setup. Average and even above average players simply do not have the skills of those they see on TV.

Again, analogies are useful in this discussion. These players might point out that when they play tennis, or football, or bowl, or even shoot pool, they are playing on the same conditions as the professionals in those sports, so why not golf? My rationale is that these are what I like to call “linear” sports. The playing “fields” are based on rigid, angular lines that remain constant throughout the game, from day to day, from place to place. These are two dimensional sports—one being physical skill and the other mental. The playing “fields” have only a limited influence on the player's success or failure.

In my eyes golf is a “non-linear”, three-dimensional game. Rigid, angular lines have no place in golf. Contoured fairways, flowing bunkers and undulated greens are viewed by virtually all golfers as more attractive and desirable than fairways that look like runways or hotdogs, perfectly round bunkers and flat greens. Most importantly, in addition to the men-

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Course Management—

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tal and physical aspects of the game, golf adds a third dimension—the course itself. **And in the case of golf, the playing “field” is equally as influential on the outcome as the other two aspects.**

All this leads to an obvious conclusion. A course should be set up commensurate with the skills of those who are to play it. In a USGA championship, the players are all exceptionally skilled and the course can and should be set up appropriately. However, daily play on courses will involve players from one end of the talent spectrum to the other. A middle ground must be established so that everyone can find something they enjoy. Let's all face facts here. Few if any players at the club level play as well as the folks they see on TV. They may think they want the same conditions, but they would quickly find they are not up to the challenge. You know those flatbellies that sit in the 19th hole and watch the pros putt on greens with speeds over 10 feet, and then think the greens at their course should be the same? I often wonder how they drive home after watching the Indy 500 on TV.

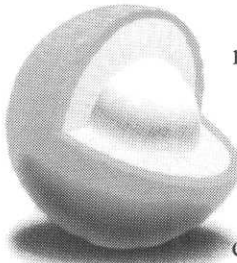
ISSUE #4

“Can we have championship conditions even if we want them?”

The next issue is one that I feel is perhaps the most crucial. Most superintendents realize that the conditions seen on TV during a major championship simply cannot be maintained for an extended period of time. Unfortunately, many players have virtually no knowledge of the steps necessary to produce such conditions. Starved greens, microscopic cutting heights, unlimited labor and equipment and the course dried to the bone are not conditions that can be maintained for more than a few days at a time in most climates. This is truly “Management On The Edge” (Refer to the *Green Section Record* article of July, 1987 by the same name). It takes months and years to prepare a course for a major championship. Often, the complete reconstruction of greens and tees, reshaping of fairways, and yes, even the removal of trees that have been allowed to ruin the architecture of a classic design, must be accomplished prior to the event. Attempting to maintain championship conditions on a daily basis would destroy most courses.

As the Green Section staff travels the country, we often find ourselves explaining these facts to those present on the tour of the course. We also frequently visit clubs that are “pushing” the course way too hard in an effort to provide championship conditions. As a result, we often make recommendations to raise cutting heights, fertilize more and accept slower greens. These recommendations are in direct contrast to preparations for an Open. Is this “two-faced?” **No, it's just common sense.**

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Weeds—

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pretty clear when you see a good stand of dock that the area gets flooded during the year,” he says. “Basically, if you've got dock, don't plant your vegetables there.” But weeds, he added, “can't replace a soil test.”

—*American Horticulturist*,
March 1993

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