

# ALTERNATIVE SPIKES

More than two and one half years ago, in the June 1995 issue of *JD Approach*, the subject of finding workable alternatives to traditional steel golf spikes was a hot topic. At that time, data was just beginning to come in from clubs where soft spikes were the rule — there were only about 100 courses where soft spikes were regularly used, and even fewer than that where steel spikes had been banned.

A lot has changed. More than 2,000 courses — with that number going up literally everyday — now prohibit the use of steel spikes.

Why has the acceptance of alternative spikes spread so rapidly?

Two main reasons:

1. Golfers have become more demanding, especially when it comes to the quality of the putting surface. As they learned what alternative spikes can mean on the green, they led the charge.

2. A variety of alternative spikes have been developed and are readily available.

## What's Ahead?

The search for alternatives to steel spikes has been around about as long as the spikes themselves — which means since the late 1940s. Few have ever contested the fact that steel spikes can damage turf — especially in delicate areas like tees and greens — or that they can be unknowing agents for spreading disease and pests. But, until this decade the concern for change wasn't supported by viable alternatives.

Now, with the support of such organizations as the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) the movement to replace steel spikes has gained momentum.

At its 1997 conference in Las Vegas, GCSAA conducted a survey to gauge the interest in soft spikes. The result showed that soft spikes are not a fad, they are a trend — 45 percent of those representing private clubs said they already have a soft spike rule, while an additional 30 percent said they encourage the use of alternatives. In the public sector, only 13 percent of those surveyed said they had a soft spike rule, while 39 percent said they encouraged players to switch away from steel spikes.

On a personal note, more than 90 percent of the GCSAA's members said they favored a switch to soft spikes, and predicted that half the courses in the country would go that route within two years.

## Reasons for Switching

The playability of the putting surface was the overwhelming reason for switching to alternative spikes — 73 percent of those responding put the health of the turf and its effect on play as their top priority.

For those that made the changes, it was the opinion of the golf course superintendent and the club pro that held the most weight. And, in most cases (40 percent) golfers were expected to pay for the changeover — in the first years when clubs were pushing members to go with soft spikes, they spent \$4,000 to \$5,000 providing each player with new spikes. Now, it is more common to find that clubs will change-out a player's shoes for a slight fee.

The factors that superintendents and golf professionals consider in making a recommendation to their club management fall into three basic groups — agronomic, golfers and

the industry.

## Agronomic

These are the concerns for the health of the plants on greens and tees, spread of diseases and pests, soil compaction and the overall "look" of the course.

## Golfers

These are more difficult to measure, but include the ability to have sure footing without slipping, overall comfort — soft spikes are said to be easier on a player's back and knees than steel spikes — and the quality of the putting surface. Of these, the quality of the putting surface is the easiest to measure. All you have to do is look at a green after a busy day and see a smooth, unmarked surface to know there's a difference.

## The Industry

What are other courses doing? How do professional tour players react? Davis Love III won the 1997 PGA Championship at Winged Foot wearing soft spikes!

The GCSAA, after weighing all the factors and evaluating its survey results came to two conclusions:

1) Courses should encourage the use of alternative, 2) The golf course superintendent should play a major role in any decision to change.

Nearly three years ago the *JD Approach* story concluded that "the jury is still out" on the use of soft spikes. It appears that the deliberations are all but over — steel spikes have been found guilty.

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