

TURFGRASS MATTERS

March/April 1997

Volume 69, Number 1

Spikeless Shoes

By R. Jim Moore, USGA

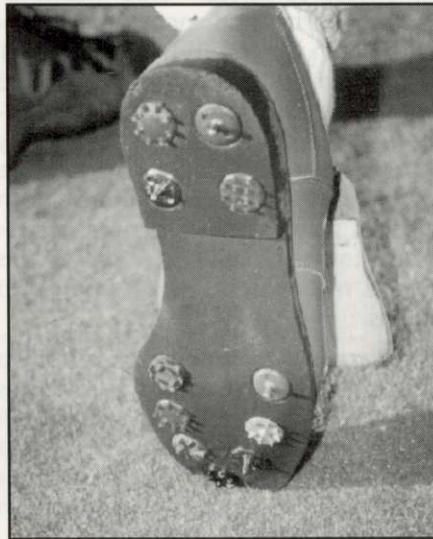
Few issues have stirred as much debate as the issue of spikeless shoes. As an agronomist for the USGA, I am frequently asked my opinion on the issue, and predictably it is met with varying acceptance by both golfers and golf course superintendents. Perhaps the best way to help those who are involved in this debate make a rational decision about the use of spikeless shoes is to evaluate the pros and cons of this issue. Please keep in mind that the following observations are based on my professional opinion and not necessarily the position of the USGA.

Impact on putting quality

With the exception of a few years in the military spent fixing broken B-52's, I have spent most of my life trying to provide better putting quality for golfers. An often quoted proverb in the golf course superintendent's world is "Your greens are your resume." As a result, anything that improves putting quality will be quickly accepted by those whose livelihood depends on the golfer's evaluation of the putting surface. Make no mistake - when a club switches to spikeless shoes they enjoy a tremendous improvement in putting quality. In fact, not in all my career have I seen any new maintenance tool or practice bring about a greater positive change in the way the ball rolls across the green. Predictably, golf course superintendents have almost unanimously accepted and promoted the change to spikeless shoes.

Impact on the health of the grass

Although some work has been done in this area, indicating it is actually better for the health of the turf not to wear spikes, it is doubtful that the degree of improvement justifies eliminating all spikes from greens. As to the argument



that getting rid of the spikes will help eliminate *Poa annua*, there definitely needs to be more research on this issue before such claims can be substantiated. We can expect scientific research to shed light on both of these issues over the coming year.

Impact on newly planted greens

Spikeless shoes have a very positive impact on newly planted greens. Both bermudagrass and bentgrass grow laterally when first planted (they don't call it creeping bentgrass for nothing). Only after the newly planted green is completely covered with mature turf (the maturing process normally takes 8 to 10 growing weeks for bermudagrass and 12 to 14 growing weeks for bentgrass) will it start to assume the upright growth habit that is necessary for good putting quality. Predictably, while the turf is in a spreading mode, it is easily snagged by spiked shoes. Going spikeless while the new greens are maturing will reduce injury to the turf and make for much better putting quality.

There is another very important point to make regarding the tendency of turf to spread laterally.

Bentgrass and bermudagrass will assume this growth habit whenever it needs to cover a worn or thin area, as well as after planting. In other words, if a green is very heavily played to the point that the surface is worn thin, the turf will revert to the lateral and spreading growth habit necessary to achieve complete coverage. For this reason, spikeless shoes have a much greater impact on heavily played greens than on those that receive very little use.

Comfort

Many people have told me how much more comfortable they find spikeless shoes to walk in, compared to spiked shoes. Many members of our staff wear them because of the comfort factor, and because you can wear them into the club house after being on the golf course.

Are spikeless shoes dangerous?

There seems to be little doubt that traction is reduced by eliminating spikes. There have been numerous accounts of players injured when they slipped on a steep grassy slope or wet wooden walkway. Injuries have been recorded from golfers wearing spiked shoes as well. Although it is important

(Continued on page 5)

Published by the
Mid-Atlantic Association of
Golf Course Superintendents



Spikeless Shoes

Continued from page 1

to reduce injuries as much as possible, I often wonder what would happen if the shoe was on the other foot (pardon the pun). What if spiked shoes had just been introduced? How many injuries would we hear about due to someone slipping on concrete, tile, or marble floors or catching a spike on a step?

Common sense seems to dictate that no shoe is 100% safe. Just as you must use caution when walking with spikes on hard and slick surfaces, you need to use your head when climbing wet, grassy slopes without your spikes. (Note - ryegrass can be particularly slippery when either wet or dry due to the very smooth surface of the leaf.)

Should they be made mandatory?

Golfers (like most people) hate to be forced to do anything. (Just look where they drive their carts if you need additional proof.) This is particularly true when it comes to our personal habits, such as how we wear our hair or what kinds of clothes we wear.

Nevertheless, we occasionally adhere to certain standards for reasons of practicality. This is particularly true in sports where special gear is needed to play the game. My personal opinion is that in most cases mandatory, long-term compliance is a bad idea. However, a mandatory trial period may be necessary to ensure that golfers (at a particular course) give spikeless a try. After a fair trial period, most will find they really do not need spikes to enjoy the game. They will also find there are many good alternatives to spikes that not only provide sufficient traction, but also make walking easier and more comfortable overall. Once the trial period is over, it is likely that the number of golfers making spike marks on the greens will have been reduced dramatically.

Will the loss of traction hurt your game?

The most honest and obvious answer is that it depends on your game. I personally have not played in spikes for more than ten years (I like the teaching shoes available from a number of manufacturers) and do not miss them. I will admit that occasionally I slip on the tee when trying to really bust one. However, in my case the convenience

of not having to mess with an extra pair of shoes outweighs the problem of a rare, minor loss of traction on the tee. For golfers as a whole, I expect they would find that smooth, spike-free greens would have a such a positive impact on their game that the drawback of less traction would be far outweighed.

Spikeless shoes are probably not for everyone. The touring pros may feel that any loss of traction is just too great a risk to take financially (although they may have the most to gain from smooth, spike-free greens). Based on some of the swings I have observed when traveling the country on behalf of the USGA, there are some amateur players who need spikes just to stay rooted to the earth!

The bottom line is that as more players find going spikeless is acceptable, the better the greens will putt. All golfers should give spikeless a fair try. I am convinced that the vast majority will find they enjoy the game just as much without spikes. I am certain we all will enjoy the improvement in the greens.

Jim Moore is the Green Section Director of the USGA Mid-Continent Region

ANNOUNCEMENT

LEBANON CHEMICAL APPOINTS NEWSOM SEED as DISTRIBUTOR

Lebanon
TURF PRODUCTS



Call NEWSOM SEED for LEBANON PRODUCTS

Strick Newsom 800-553-2719
Allen Bohrer Fax 301-762-9544

Sam Kessel 703-242-0559
Fax 703-242-6430

Jim Claxton 800-441-4740
Fax 410-531-2863