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Green Speed:

The Truth and Consequences of Fast Greens

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Years ago, there was a man named Edward Stimpson who loved golf and craved to create more fairness in the game. To further his passion, he invented a device intended to ensure that all the greens on a course were of relatively equal speed. The idea was to give superintendents (then, greenkeepers) a way to compare the speed of the 4th green with the 13th and take steps to equalize them. This was, no doubt, a sound and noble idea. But sometimes bad things happen to good ideas.

Today, his simple tool, the Stimpmeter, is often misused to compare the speed of greens from course to course and unfortunately, to establish a benchmark of putting difficulty. Golfers are sometimes heard to say, "Hey, Hickory Hills was 'stimping' 13 last week." This essentially means that the greens were as fast as the linoleum on most kitchen floors.

From a purely competitive standpoint, that's OK. However, this quest for fast greens has serious consequences in terms of cost, environmental quality and the long-term health of the green. In short, speed can kill. Here's why:

A healthy, vigorous green can be maintained at a very short cutting height (as low as 1/8-inch) for short periods of time without serious consequences if it's been prepared properly and weather conditions are acceptable. Courses hosting tournaments often take months (and spend significant extra money) to bring greens up to an ultrafast speed for PGA Tour players. For example, the greens at Augusta National or Oakmont may "stimp" up to 14 when properly prepared and dry.

However, fast greens are extremely fragile. If you compared them with human beings, it would be fair to say that their immune systems can be very weak. They become susceptible to diseases and pests, and therefore may require more chemical treatments. Weather can also quickly destroy the health of an ultrafast green. High temperatures and lack of moisture in the air are deadly to greens that are maintained at very short cutting heights for any length of time.

The risks of maintaining fast greens — even with the best professional management by superintendents — were apparent in the summer of 1995 when golf courses across the eastern United States lost greens during an extended period of drought and high temperatures. Many of the world's best-known courses suffered serious damage and were essentially unplayable for the last half of the year. Many of these had to be reseeded or completely rebuilt at a cost that was high in terms of budget, playability and reputation. The solution to the dilemma of fast greens is twofold. First, the golf industry is sponsoring and promoting research and development of new grasses that are more tolerant of fast speeds under adverse conditions.

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