

Tournament Speeds Push Greens to the Limit

by Kevin Cooney, assistant editor

For the sake of members who want their putts to roll "the way they do on TV," superintendents have spent the past decade or so pushing grass plants to the limit in the pursuit of ever faster green speeds.

Increased attention to Stimpmeter readings have resulted in more cross-cutting, lower cutting heights and induced drought

... preoccupation with the Stimpmeter has gone too far.

practices to give putters a snappy roll as they try to save par.

Sherwood Moore, whose Winged Foot Golf Club was named one of the top ten courses in the country by *Golf Digest*, has been quoted as saying he believes preoccupation with the Stimpmeter has gone too far. Unless superintendents start easing off green speed, Moore believes troublesome problems will pop up within a few years.

But what are the long-term impacts of these cultivation methods? Long range studies on green speed practices have not been conducted, but Jim Snow of the United States Golf Association Green Section said he's noticing some things that may be connected to high speed cultivation practices. Snow said he's observed an increase in moss on northeastern greens in the past year, and he believes this may be partly due to superintendents'

efforts to please their members.

"In the next few years we'll probably see more moss and other problems," associated with increased stress on greens, he said. Snow agrees that faster greens are generally desirable, but he's concerned that in the rush to speed up the roll, "we may



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be going too far" and compromising turf quality for the sake of quickness.

Tom Goetz II, superintendent of the Manufacturers Golf and Country Club, Orland, PA, doesn't worry about green speed on his course. After increasing his green speeds several years ago, "I caught so much grief (from mem-

bers) that I don't do it anymore," he said.

Concept oversold

Many of Goetz' greens in the hilly Pennsylvania countryside have slight slopes, "and they just couldn't hold the ball" after close cutting, he explained.

The average player just wants a reasonable chance to sink the putt—he doesn't have to have tournament-like conditions to enjoy his round, Goetz noted. "But when you get to these huge greens, I think that's when speed becomes a factor."

At any rate, Goetz believes the concept itself is oversold.

"The average player just wants a reasonable chance to sink a putt ..."

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"Sometimes, when I talk to other superintendents, the first thing they ask me is 'how fast are your greens,' like it's a big point," he said.

It is a big point to Wayne Zoppo, whose clients at Agawam Hunt in East Providence, RI, feel high green speeds "are very important."

Since 1972 Zoppo has top-dressed his greens four times a year, increased verticutting and kept his mowing height down to 3/32. Zoppo's proud of the fact



“Everything you do (for faster greens) has to be fine tuned to head off disease.

—Wayne Zoppo

that his greens averaged 10.5 feet on the Stimpmeter during the 1983 season.

Any problems? “None,” Zoppo says.

The only thing he does differently now is use putting green mowers “a lot more often” to cut the circles of greens instead of his

hydraulic machines.

The only problem Goetz encountered when he worked for speed was wheel rings on the green from his triplex mowers, he said.

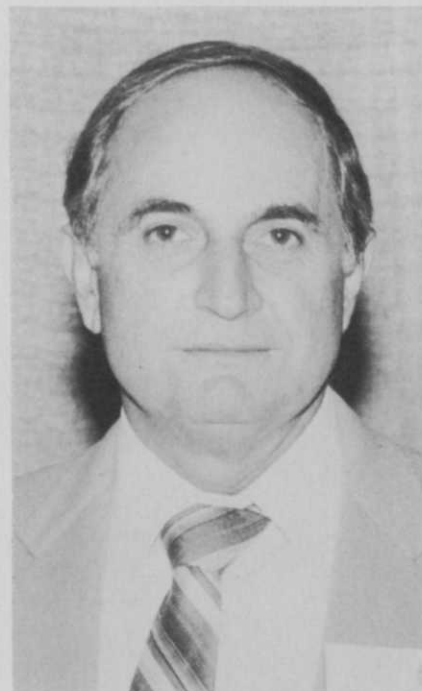
But “everything you do has to be more fine tuned,” to head off disease problems, Snow said. Someone should be on the course every day checking those low-cut greens and have the expertise, time and equipment to quickly respond to deficiencies. Snow warned that the increased cost and expertise required to properly maintain fast greens, “may leave a lot of fellows unprepared” to care for their courses properly.

Penn State University’s Dr. Joe Duich has done extensive research on green speed, and his tests identify lower cutting heights and reduced fertilization rates as the most predictable ways to boost ball roll.

Middle ground

Duich too, has called for moderation in the race for the fastest green on the block, and reminds superintendents to strive for consistent playing speeds across the entire course and not simply the fastest surface they can muster.

Rather than shoot for the ever-faster green, “Raise it (the cutting height) as high as your membership will permit,” bermu-



“We have no problems whatsoever with keeping greens fast.”

—Tony Caranci

dgrass expert Glenn W. Burton said flatly. “As a general principle, mowing that close is bound to weaken that plant, and I think, likely to increase its susceptibility to increased wear damage and other diseases.”

He echoed Snow’s suggestion about checking the greens closely every day during the season to try and head off problems. While noting “if the plant had its way, you’d never cut it,” Burton observed, “the turf is out there for the game of golf—we have to satisfy that golfer.”

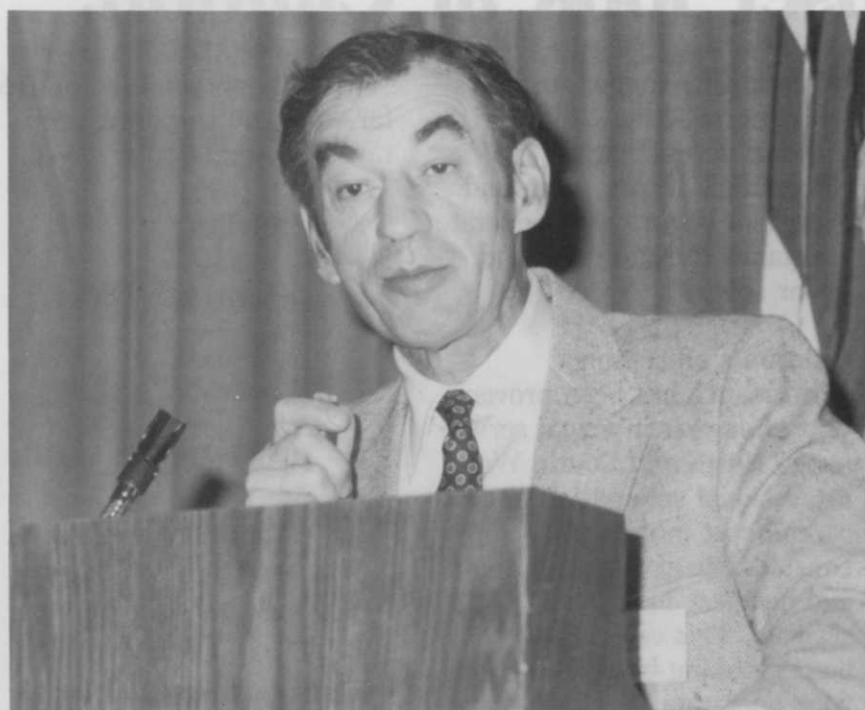
One way to help close-cut plants, he noted, is to raise cutting heights as far as possible in the autumn to help quick recovery the following spring. Burton also said increased autumn watering will help the plant rest easy during the winter.

Tony Caranci, superintendent at the Ledgesmont Country Club in Seekonk, MA, keeps moisture in

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“Strive for consistent speed across the entire course.”

—Dr. Joe Duich



APRIL

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mind throughout the playing season. His program consists of lower fertilizing rates and verticutting, cross-cutting and topdressing. During the summer he trims his greens daily, with daily cross-cutting reserved for tournaments. But he also includes regular applications of wetting agents to help the greens survive that intense management.

His average speeds on the Stimpmeter vary between seven and nine feet, and Caranci reports "no problems whatsoever," as a result of his management system.

If you're looking at renovating your greens in the future, Burton advises superintendents to look at grasses whose leaves grow close to the ground. As an example, he noted that Tifdwarf grasses withstand high-speed cultivation practices better than Tifgreen or 328, because the latter type has a tall-growing leaf system.

Snow said he believes the "ideal" green speed superintendents should strive for lies between 7.5 and 8.5 feet, which he called "very reasonable, and fair, and enjoyable to play without doing severe damage to the turf."

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Doug Hawes, USGA Green Section regional director, suggests that superintendents try to find a "middle ground" between the varying opinions of course members on speed. He also recommends gradually increasing green speeds and holding the increase to no more than one foot a year so players can adjust.

With all the attention given speed factors in recent years, Hawes reminds superintendents not to overlook other factors.

"Some greens are unfair at any speed," he said. **WT&T**

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