

NOT SO FAST

Opinions on green speeds vary as much as the management practices themselves. In the following, a few superintendents reflect on the trials and tribulations of managing greens in the face of pressure from players.

by Jeff Sobul, associate editor



Superintendent Mike Phillips (standing) and assistant Carl Rygg use a stimpmeter to check green speeds at The Links at Spanish Bay, the only fine fescue putting surfaces in the U.S. They cut the greens at an uncommonly high $\frac{5}{32}$ of an inch.

Recent trends have sent golf course greens cutting heights down and green speeds up. But somewhere along the way, some people forgot about that little fellow, the grass plant.

Tired of being walked all over, the little green (and sometimes brown) plant started retaliating at the players who wanted those lightning speeds. Unfortunately, the superintendent was pretty much the recipient of abuse from plants and players alike.

The lower you cut turf, the more susceptible it is to disease and stress. Then, by reducing fertilization—as some courses did to improve speed—the plant is denied nutrients needed to sustain healthy growth.

Jim Hippely, superintendent at Salem (Ohio) Golf Club, provides a good example of what many supers face. “We mow at $\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch because the membership requests it,” he says. That, he adds, results in many sleepless nights.

Another Ohioan, John Spodnik at Westfield Country Club, finds himself in a similar situation. He also mows his greens at $\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch at member request. “The ‘hot 100’—June, July and August—puts a strain on the grass,” he notes. “Needless to say, the turf manager must perform accordingly at his best. Sometimes that is not good enough!”

Are superintendents being forced to worship the almighty stimpmeter? Or are they finding ways to keep the faith without offering sacrificial turfgrass?

Scott Niven at the Stanwich Club in Greenwich, Conn., seems to have found some middle ground. “We used to cut at $\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch, nine cuts a week,” he notes. “Greens were fast but deteriorated in quality. Values in excess of 10 on the stimpmeter were too fast to be fair on greens with slopes like mine.

“Now we cut at $\frac{9}{64}$ of an inch. Greens are a bit slower (8.5-9.5),” he says, “but healthier, better looking and easier to manage.”

Sometimes it's situational, with speeds and height varying according to the time of year or occasion. Such is



Golf course architect Mike Hurdzan incorporates knowledge of golf design history into his present designs matching green slope to putting speed and skill.

the case at the prestigious Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va.

In the past, executive director of golf and grounds Robert Mitchell has had speeds as high as 12 to 13 on the stimpmeter for the 1979 Ryder Cup matches. For other tournaments, Mitchell keeps greens at around 9.5.

Otherwise, he says, "my opinion is that the guests who come to play the Greenbrier enjoy our courses with a putting speed of 8.5. Thus, I try to keep speeds between eight and nine on our three 18-hole courses."

That means a swing away from scalping. Mitchell believes a 1/8-inch cutting height is too low for bentgrass/poa greens in his region.

"I prefer verticutting, top dressing, judicious use of fertilizer and chemicals, and even double cutting," he explains.

Also, recent technological advancements are making their way onto the market. That will improve speed and texture without lowering cutting height. Most notable are the turf groomers.

Jacobson's Turf Groomer was the first to enter the market and was followed shortly thereafter by Toro's Grooming Reel and Lesco's groomer. Since these are pretty new to the market, their collective effect is yet to be felt.

Variables

Most superintendents will continue to use existing equipment and techniques to manage greens.

Chuck Clark of The Broadmoor in



The Stanwich Club members sacrificed a little speed so that Scott Niven could adjust management techniques to keep greens healthier and playing more honestly.

Colorado Springs, notes, however, that adjustments are a constant necessity. Weather conditions, he says, can change stimp readings from morning to afternoon. "When weather conditions don't cooperate, speeds which may begin the day at around nine may end up at 11 before the day is over."

To help keep his greens (and himself) out of stress during uncooperative weather, he has added a syringing system around all the greens to help preserve them with little inconvenience to the golfer.

Good intentions

The original intent of the stimpmeter



Superintendent Robert Mitchell integrates several management techniques to keep green speeds constant and turf healthy for guests at The Greenbrier.

was to determine consistency of green speed from one green to the next and act accordingly to keep them consistent, thereby introducing skill into holing a putt.

Golf course architect Mike Hurdzan, Ph.D., would like to see skill returned to putting. He finds it ridiculous that the best players in the world would three- and four-putt from 10 or 12 feet, as they did at the 1982 Masters—the year Augusta switched to bentgrass "on slopes designed for Bermuda," he says. "Putting became luck, not skill." Hurdzan points out that Alister MacKenzie designed Augusta's green contours with Bermudagrass in mind.

"The point is," Hurdzan believes, "if putting is to be a skillful pursuit, then speed and slope must be matched."

Accomplishing this will take some time. Some help from the PGA and its members would be a good start. Playing pros are the most visible and influential people at pointing the way, as they did with higher speeds. They can do the same by moving back toward Hurdzan's three S's: speed, slope and skill; and a return to proper stimp-meter use.

"The stimpmeter can be a useful tool only when everyone has been properly educated to its intended use and an agreement has been struck as to how it will effect our management practices," The Broadmoor's Clark concludes. "It won't be the pro or the club manager who will be moving on when the greens die." **LM**