Best-made tees: well-drained and roomy

There are two ways to "tee off" golfers: provide them with lush, spacious well-drained tees, or subject them to matchbook-sized tee surfaces with compacted soil.

Jim Latham sorta' thinks the former is the better way to go.

An agronomist with the USGA Green Section, Latham has seen the best and the worst the industry has to offer, and says the worst tees are brought about by a combination of poor cultural practices.

Start with drainage

Latham says that the best tees are well-drained, with a sand subsurface across the entire tee. "This way," he explains, "as the tee is watered, moisture goes into the sand and off in all directions. The shoulders, made of heavier soil, direct water toward the drain tile.

Broken ball tees are a sure sign of rock-hard, compacted soil. Add water, ASAP.

"The better the drainage off the slopes," continues Latham, "the easier the slopes are to maintain" with heavy mowers or aerators.

Be on the lookout for more broken ball tees than usual; they're a sure sign of thirsty, rock hard soil.

Shift the wear around

When building tees, remember: the wider the tee, the easier it is to shift wear and tear from side to side as well as from front to back. This might be harder to do on No. 1, since that's usually the smallest tee on the course.

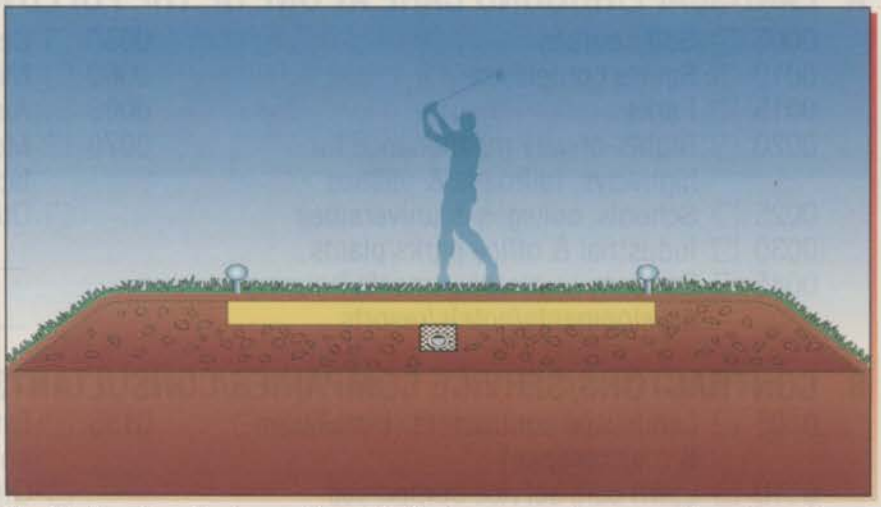
Latham quotes the USGA specs for tees: "for par 4 or 5 holes, we like to see about 100 square feet for every 1000 rounds played; with par threes, about 200 square feet per 1000 rounds. It takes that much space to keep up with the traffic over the long haul."

No trees on tees

Tees are for people. Large trees, when too close to tees, might just as well be weeds.

Especially, says Latham, with the cool-season grasses. They can't handle shade, traffic and competition for nutrients simultaneously.

Tees with lots of elbow room make it easier to control wear and tear from side to side and front to back.



Sand below the playing surface eliminates compaction, provides adequate tee drainage. Thicker soil on the slopes directs moisture towards the drain tile. Better drainage means easier mowing.

If you suspect a root is robbing the turf of nutrients, but do not want to remove it, Latham recommends root pruning.

Let the poa alone

Latham takes a positive outlook when it comes to *Poa annua* on tees. If a tee has some poa established, says Latham, "why not capitalize on it, and give it hell. Over-water it, over-fertilize it, aerify it, do something with it."

Shrubbery surrounding a tee might look good, but it's not considered a wise practice as it impedes air flow. "And without that air movement," says Latham, "we don't get evaporation. It's not giving the tee the necessary cooling effect," so important during warm weather.

Rye is recommended

Latham believes perennial ryegrass is "terrific" for cool-season tees.

"It comes up fast, produces well, can be cut at any height and looks pretty good if you seed them heavily enough."

When seeding new tees, Latham also recommends rolling the seed after it's put down to guarantee soil contact.

"It's such a simple thing," says Latham, "but so many times, a superintendent forgets to do it."

And *don't* forget to aerify. **LM**