



*Original practice range designed by Donald Ross (1914), at Siwanoy Country Club, New York.*

# Practice Ranges - Are They Neglected?

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**I**TEM — Some years ago a major golf magazine published a well-known amateur golfer's remarks deploring the condition of the practice range at his home course. This was followed shortly by a heated "letter to the editor" from the golf course superintendent to the effect that the distinguished gentleman did not adequately appreciate the situation. Did he realize the difficulties, costs, relatively low priority in the competition for funding and the general lack of golfer cooperation in the care of the range?

ITEM — For the September, 1981, issue of the *Green Section Record*, Herb Graffis wrote an article about lesson

and practice areas under the title "Golf Neglects the Idea that Made It Big."

ITEM — As a keen observer of the golf course maintenance scene, retired Green Section National Director Al Radko summed up prevailing impressions this way: "Practice ranges at golf courses are often an eyesore in an otherwise plush setting. The range, a most desirable facility, is too frequently neglected in the budget and is given little incentive for improvement."

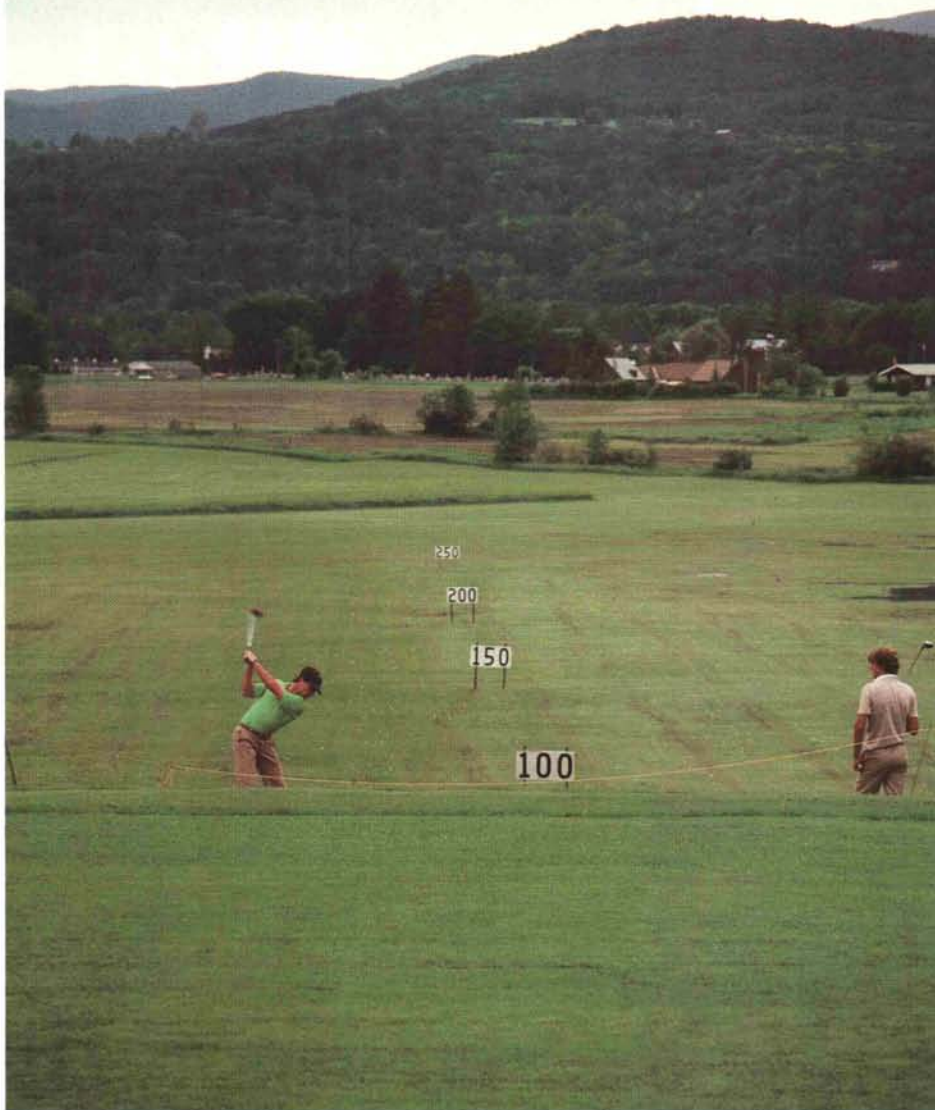
Given this background, I set out to survey the situation during my Turf Advisory Service consultations in 1981. The study was done in the Northeastern states mainly, but the results may well prove of general interest nationwide.

## THE RESULTS

Number of courses surveyed	125
Number with inadequate ranges	75 (60%)
Number with adequate ranges	25 (20%)
Number with good ranges	25 (20%)

To the statistician, the results of the survey should not be considered statistically valid even for this section of the country. Still, the findings indicate that the situation is not quite as bad as many might have thought. This is especially true when the surveyed courses are considered as a group.





Practice range at Stowe Country Club, Vermont. A good facility; upper tee roped off for turf recovery period.

Individually, however, far too many courses clearly provide inadequate facilities, and many have no practice range at all.

#### THE DEFICIENCIES\*

No practice range	43
Practice teeing area too small	12
Range fairway too small (under 100 yards wide — 3; under 250 yards long — 25)	28
Agronomic limitations (For example, severe drainage problems or lack of irrigation for tee)	11
Teeing surface (not up to expectations for smoothness and turf density)	most

\*These numbers do not add to 75 since some practice areas suffer from more than one deficiency. Teeing surface conditions were not considered for tabulation since few were considered to be satisfactory by the superintendents themselves.

Obviously there is an element of subjectivity involved in making the judgements about some of the noted deficiencies. Also to be considered are the relative needs of each individual course, i.e., a single 4,500-square-foot tee may be sufficient in one case, whereas another facility could require five times as much useable area. With these things in mind, an attempt was made to at least be consistent wherever situations were not clear-cut.

Another reason these findings are difficult to project overall is that there was probably a disproportionately high number of older courses sampled. In only five cases, for example, had the range been designed and built with the original course. Included in this group, interestingly enough, is the Siwanoy Country Club, in suburban New York City. It was perhaps here that architect Donald Ross first introduced the innovation of a practice range. The

survey found that at some point seven courses had redesigned their course and converted one of their original golf holes into a practice range.

What is the future for practice areas on those golf courses sampled? Unfortunately, over 70 percent of those already without separate practice facilities appear not to have access to enough uncommitted land for future development. This even included — regrettably — courses designed and built without adequate practice facilities within the past decade or two, some of these being municipal operations. Two of the courses surveyed, however, have found a solution in leasing adjacent land for practicing. But one of these has also chosen to make no improvements on this area “because that might lead to an increase in the taxation rate.” One course is even lucky enough to be located across the road from a commercial driving range. Surprisingly, only one of the 25 public facilities included in the survey has developed a commercial-type driving range facility of its own.

Contrary to the notion of complete neglect, a variety of projects were found to be in progress.

#### IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITIES (1981)

Teeing area rebuilding and/or enlarging	10
Teeing area sodding	2
Range fairway enlarging	3
Building a practice area	1
Other design improvements (drainage, irrigation, adding practice bunkers, etc.)	5
Planning to build (5) or rebuild (5) range	10

While these figures may not show a great flurry of improvement activity, they do indicate promise. Most encouraging is the finding that of the 12 surveyed courses now lacking a separate practice range but having enough extra land available, fully half of them are either in some stage of planning to build a range or have actually done so in 1981. (Two of these projects are being held up pending the approval of various state agencies.) Also notable are the five other courses making plans to rebuild ranges in different locations to overcome deficiencies in their existing situation, i.e., mostly the lack of sufficient length. The fact that several of these projects will also require some reworking of existing golf holes makes



the practice area undertakings all the more impressive.

#### SOME MANAGEMENT IDEAS

Promising, but not revealed by the data, is the array of approaches being tried for solving some of the practice area maintenance problems more effectively and efficiently. Included are such things as:

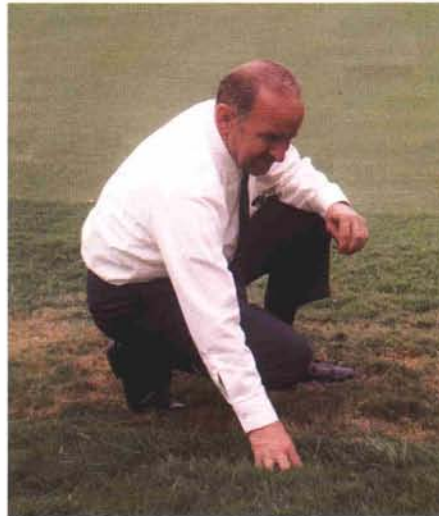
- Use of growth retardants on range fairway (to cut mowing requirements).
- Designation of "in-use" portion of teeing area with rope, pinned to the ground, and moved as needed for better control of wear patterns.
- Multiple use of range turf, including using it as fairway turf nurseries and as product testing areas.
- Use of artificial netting/screening and/or plantings as safety barriers or as backstops on short ranges (making small ranges more nearly ideal in size).
- Use of shallow (2" depth) circles of sand as target areas.
- Restriction of one area for woods only (cutting size of teeing area in need of higher-intensity management).
- Use of compaction-limiting mesh material (Enkamat) on teaching tee area (combined with other management procedures to speed turf recovery).
- Regular teeing area topdressing and/or divot filling with soil/seed mix.
- Enlisting assistance of golf professional and golfers in maintaining surface smoothness by placing soil/seed containers on "in-use" teeing areas.

In summary, it is unfortunate that too many older courses find themselves with nowhere to go for adequate practice area development. Even some of the newer courses have been remiss in providing for this most desirable, if not absolutely essential facility. Nevertheless, golf is not neglecting this need altogether.

Of course, there remains much room for improvement. Very much to the credit of the golf course superintendent, they expressed, almost to a man, a desire to be able to upgrade practice facilities. One in particular summed up the most important aspect of the problem this way:

"The practice range is always the lowest-priority item in my budget. Every year I propose funding for improvements and a higher level of maintenance. Every year this is the first item to be eliminated. It looks like we'll just have to make do until the year comes when there is absolutely nothing else extra that needs doing anywhere at the club."

## Al Radko Retires



**E**VERY NOW and then, if a profession is lucky enough, some special person comes along with exceptional talent, unmatched thoughtfulness and total dedication. Al Radko is such a man!

No one has worked for the good of golfing turf and the golf superintendent through the USGA Green Section

longer than Al Radko's 35 years. He has traveled much of the world. He was responsible, to a large degree, for the rehabilitation of Japan's golf courses immediately after World War II. He was responsible also for the construction and care of the USGA's gift, "Ike's Green," to the White House in the early 1950s. Since graduating from the University of Maryland in 1948, he has held every possible position the Green Section has to offer: technician, agronomist, Northeast Director, National Director, Research Director, USGA Championship Course conditioning responsibilities, as well as editor of the *Green Section Record*. The USGA has been his sole employer and agronomics for golf his total avocation and occupation.

There is probably not a turf conference in the USA that Al Radko has not addressed at one time or another. There is probably not a publication in our field today that has not carried an article written by him.

For that young lad from Yonkers, New York, who has loved golf all his life — "teeing up time" is here. The good will and warm wishes of everyone who has known him or been touched by his untold contributions to better turf are extended to him in his retirement. May all his pars seem like birdies, and all the smiles in golf be as broad as his.

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## MAINTENANCE Aids

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### A TIP FROM

#### TIM HIERS

Former Golf Course Superintendent,  
Suntree Country Club,  
Melbourne, Florida

Traffic control "buttons" are excellent for control of carts and remind the driver to stay on the asphalt path. There was no turf to the left three months prior to gluing these "buttons" with epoxy glue at Suntree Country Club, Melbourne, Florida.

