Search Your Sole — Remove Your Spikes!

by LARRY W. GILHULY
Director, Western Region, USGA Green Section

TURN ON your television and you will see the action. A tall, slender individual rises high into the air while throwing his arm forward with great malice. The hand contacts a round ball that proceeds across a net at 100-plus mph and hits the ground. Great spike! Now change channels. The golf professional methodically lines up a five-footer to win the tournament. After what seems like an eternity, he strikes the putt only to watch it hop right and lip out. Bad spike or, more correctly, spike mark!

Golf spikes have been cussed and discussed for years. Their negative effects were well documented by the USGA Green Section in the November 1958 and September 1959 issues of the USGA Journal and Turf Management. These early studies (33 years ago!) showed that the conventional golf spike not only caused severe damage to the turf, but the curved shoulder of the spike also resulted in noticeable soil compaction and inhibited turfgrass recovery for weeks, when compared to other shoes.

In 1983, the Golf Shoe Study II results were reported in the September/October issue of the Green Section Record. Once again, work with the spiked golf shoe showed exactly the same results: weaker turf, more compaction, reduced recovery, and poor putting quality.

Let’s skip forward to today — 1992. What have we learned from not one, not two, but three excellent studies concerning the negative effects of golf shoe spikes? Apparently very little! We continue to use the same types of shoes, or even worse, that do millions of dollars of damage to fine turf by requiring more labor, aerification, topdressing, mowing, cup changing, and other cultural programs.

These items should be enough to encourage shoe manufacturers to devise some type of acceptable shoe that golfers will use that will cause less damage to the turf. Thus far it has not occurred. However, given the ongoing concern about the effects of golf courses on the environment, perhaps golf shoe spikes should be more of an issue. Are we not encouraging the use of more fertilizer, herbicides, insecticides, and fungicides by continuing the use of shoes that weaken the grass? You bet we are!

Still skeptical? In our area, a small nine-hole public golf course was built with large, somewhat flat bentgrass greens. The greens are now two years old, display Poa annua encroachment, exhibit weak turf in the traffic areas, and require more fertilizer and pesticides than the practice putting green. Guess what! The practice putting green received double the traffic, has little Poa annua and does not allow spiked golf shoes! Mother Nature has a way of telling us — if only we will listen.

Can you make a difference? You can by learning about the truly negative effects of golf shoe spikes. Try different shoes that have a good grip with a very high surface contact area. Educate golfers about the bad side effects of spikes and the relationship to environmental concerns. Imagine, someday spike mark controversies will be a thing of the past, bentgrass will compete better against Poa annua invasion, chemical usage will be reduced, and putting greens will be healthier and smoother. All it takes is a little “sole searching.”