The Stimpmeter: Friend or Foe?

The love/hate relationship between golf course superintendents and the Stimpmeter continues, but could this tool actually be your best friend?

BY DARIN BEVARD

Ever since the USGA completed development of the Stimpmeter in 1976 and the tool was made available to superintendents and course officials in 1978, controversy has ensued. Definitely, the Stimpmeter changed the way golf greens are compared. In the 1930s, Edward Stimpson invented the tool that would eventually become the Stimpmeter, designed to monitor green speeds on a golf course to improve its consistency. It seems that the modern Stimpmeter frequently is used to see who can produce the fastest greens, and these speeds are now a point of comparison (and often envy) from golf course to golf course.

Many superintendents refuse to “Stimp” their greens, shunning all things Stimpmeter. In fact, I once saw a Stimpmeter planted in a five gallon bucket of concrete. Talk about making a point! But what if the Stimpmeter could be used for good, as a weapon against excessive green speed? Perhaps the superintendent who pulled the weapon from the concrete could experience Camelot. Well, probably not, but read on.

First, it is important to recognize what that Stimpmeter number represents. Speed of green is discussed all of the time. For example, “My buddy played golf over the weekend, and he said the greens were rolling 14.” They probably weren’t. Green speeds are regularly mentioned on golf telecasts. However, when golfers are asked what the number represents or how it is obtained, there is silence. For the record, the Stimpmeter value is the average distance the ball rolls when released from the fixed point on the tool. Preferably, a virtually flat area on a green is selected. Three balls are rolled from the Stimpmeter, and the average ball roll distance is marked. A second set of three balls is then rolled from the marked spot in the opposite direction of the first roll, and the average is again noted. The two averages...
Newer creeping bentgrass cultivars can be mowed lower without coming under as much stress when compared with older varieties. These grasses are not indestructible, but they provide a greater flexibility in management throughout the growing season. Turfgrass species and variety are big factors in green health as it relates to promoting green speed.

are added together and divided by two to establish the distance of ball roll in feet and inches (e.g., greens are rolling 10’ 6’’). Thus, the Stimpmeter reading is not a speed at all. It is a distance. However, in the golf lexicon, this number is equivalent to the speed of the greens.

Many superintendents do not use the Stimpmeter for fear of having to post green speeds (not recommended) or having to manage their greens to a number rather than in the interest of healthy turfgrass. These are valid concerns, but they can actually be addressed better by using the Stimpmeter, rather than not using it. Golfers (of which I am one) are a fickle bunch. The perceived speed and quality of greens is often more affected by a particular golfer’s experience on a given day rather than the actual condition of the greens. Common comments include, “I didn’t putt well today. The greens were slow.” Or, “I made everything today, the greens were just the way I like them.” In terms of green speed, knowing the speed of greens helps to remove emotion from the equation when evaluating the condition of the greens and ultimately the performance of the golf course superintendent.

A big problem for golf course superintendents is golfer desire to have faster greens. Many times, the current speed of greens is not even considered. Rather, the greens just need to be faster, faster, faster. This becomes a contentious issue and can lead to problems. What if the greens are already pretty fast for daily play? Generally, as green speeds increase, so does the chance of stress to the turfgrass. How fast is too fast? The answer varies. Some facilities have the available resources to maintain very fast greens consistently, but most have to establish a reasonable daily speed target that is obtainable given available resources and grass composition, with the understanding that some portions of the growing season are not conducive to faster greens. Do not be fooled. Available resources are a big factor in maintaining green speed. For example, with adequate resources, a golf course with Poa annua greens can maintain fast speeds and effectively manage the risk to the grass with constant monitoring and hand watering. The same greens at a facility with less available resources will exhibit severe stress or even decline if an attempt is made to maintain the same speeds throughout the growing season. Having several employees available to constantly monitor greens throughout the day during the heat of the summer is a big advantage. Regardless, each golf course needs to establish a reasonable expectation for daily green speed.

Hand watering of greens is labor intensive, but it is one of the most important management factors on putting greens. Having enough resources to dedicate to constant monitoring and maintenance of greens during the heat of the summer is important for turf health.
speed based upon their resources, design characteristics, and turfgrass. In recent years, golfers have trended towards more consistent daily green speeds without severe peaks and valleys depending upon the day of the week. The practice of ramping up green speed for the weekend through aggressive grooming and maintenance, and then backing off during the week, creates more problems with green speed. Consider your average golfer. On Saturday, this golfer tees off during the morning hours and puts on greens that were just prepared for play. During the week, this same golfer may not tee off until after work, when the greens have been growing all day. If the greens were ramped up for the weekend, the disparity in speed for weekend and weekday play can be dramatic. This leads to complaints of inconsistent or slow greens during the week. Maintaining consistent, well-paced greens on a daily basis is becoming more common.

So how does the Stimpmeter fit into this context? The Stimpmeter provides knowledge, and knowledge is powerful. The first step to this process is to determine a reasonable daily green speed, taking into account the parameters of your individual golf course. Once this standard is established, efforts can be geared towards maintaining the standard. Keep in mind that if the standard is reasonable for your golf course situation, by definition the health of the turfgrass will not be compromised. Some understanding of stressful times of the growing season for your area is required as well.

Stimpmeter readings should be taken frequently to monitor green speed. This is an extra chore. With the knowledge of the actual speed, an educated conversation can be conducted about the greens. Similar areas should be tested by the same person to eliminate variability in measurements. So long as all parties involved know the standard, posting of green speed is not necessary or recommended. If a golfer complains about slow greens, the answer may be as simple as explaining that the green speed has been the same for several days. Perhaps the greens are slower. Knowing this fact provides the opportunity to explain the factors that are affecting speeds. Maybe the greens were not rolled in the interest of time, or a heavy irrigation or rainfall occurred that prompted mowing to be skipped. If you do not know the actual green speed, your performance may be evaluated based upon the whims of a golfer who had a bad day rather than the actual conditions that are present.

If you are one of the fortunate few who do not receive pressure for faster greens, count your blessings. For most, green speed is one of the biggest points of comparison between golf courses. In fact, for some, speed of greens and their overall condition is the biggest factor in the evaluation of golf course conditioning. Using the Stimpmeter to measure green speed provides an opportunity to educate golfers about what is being achieved on the greens on a daily basis. This solution may not be necessary for everyone, but the Stimpmeter can take the guesswork out of daily green speeds. How can the speed of greens be discussed if you do not know how fast they are? They cannot. In this regard, the Stimpmeter is definitely your friend!

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