

How Rough Should Rough Be?

By ancient tradition, rough should be rough in the true sense of the word, which Noah Webster defined as "coarse or rugged in character or appearance; unrefined." It should provide a definite premium for ability to control the ball through the green.

This concept, however, has been diluted through the years in the interest of more rapid and pleasurable play.

Under certain conditions, the dilution may have been warranted. Certainly, rough should not be an impenetrable turf jungle in which the average player can hardly expect to find his ball, let alone hit it.

In some cases, however, the dilution has been extreme. What advantage does the accurate player have if his wilder opponent can play as successfully from the rough as the player can from the fairway?

A Green Committee Wonders

This trend has been worrying the Green Committee of the Sunnybrook Golf Club, in Flourtown, Pa., which wants to restore the balance to golf without detracting too much from the pleasurable play of its members. In requesting guidance, Clement B. Newbold has written:

"We are conducting, under the control of our Green Committee, an experiment designed to improve and stiffen the course. Part of this experiment consists of developing a rough somewhat longer than one finds at the average club today. To several of us the modern trend of eliminating rough altogether, or simply having a token rough, is most alarming. Naturally, a large number of our members are objecting vehemently to any increase in the length of the rough because in recent years they have become accustomed on almost any course to playing out of the rough with scarcely any more difficulty than they would experience playing from the fairway.

"Some of us who played golf between 1915 and 1920 remember that during the spring of the year the rough would grow up to three feet in length and that certain national tournaments were played with this kind of rough. The rough during the Twenties was shorter, although there was plenty of rough at local clubs and it grew to be 15 inches and 16 inches long during May and June. During the depression period, 1930 to 1940, the short rough began to make its appearance. The argument was that with restricted budgets it was easier to handle the rough by cutting it short and keeping it that way; there was less trouble in finding the ball for those who did not have caddies and there was less cost in lost golf balls. During the war golf-course superintendents were very short of manpower and further entrenched the position of those who favored the short rough. The touring professionals, with the emphasis on low scores for newspaper publicity, have influenced local clubs.

"Many of us are interested in the integrity of the game's equipment and courses. It is apparent to us that the USGA devotes unceasing efforts along the same lines. Our Green Committee would like to know if there are any precedents or standards laid down in days gone by, governing the length and character of the rough as compared to the fairway. We have heard that the USGA has formulated an official policy as regards this point in the case of a golf course which proposes to entertain a USGA championship."

The Objective Sought

What the Sunnybrook Golf Club hopes to achieve, of course, is a matter of degree and not a fixed standard. When the USGA sets up a course for one of its championships, it cannot apply a fixed

standard because grasses vary so widely. It can only hope, by judgment and experience, to achieve an objective—the establishment of a uniformly difficult recovery for the player who has made an improper shot. In its Golf Championship Manual, which is prepared for the guidance of clubs preparing to entertain championships, the USGA says:

“It is desired to require greater accuracy from the tees by making all rough deeper and by narrowing the fairways between 240 and 300 yards. The narrowing should be gradual, commencing perhaps at 230 yards and reaching the narrowest part of from 35 to 40 yards at about 280 yards from the tee. (Women’s and junior competitions: This narrowing of the fairways is generally not required.)

“No specific length is suggested for cutting the rough as the length of cut depends greatly on the character of the rough itself. Where the rough is thin, a cut of six to eight inches would be ample; where heavy and matted, as is likely where present fairways are allowed to grow up into rough, a cut of even four inches might not be sufficiently low. The object to be attained is a uniformly difficult recovery for the player who has made an improper shot. The rough should not be so deep as to make a recovery impossible or to increase greatly the prospect of lost balls, but it should not be so thin that a wood or long iron can be played from it without difficulty.

“The character of the grasses in the rough will determine the type of management. Heavy clover areas should be eliminated or scythed closely not more than ten days before the competition. Thin areas may be fertilized to thicken the sod and to eliminate the possibility of a full-distance recovery shot. A condition of deep, lush grass where a ball may be lost or be completely hidden should be corrected.

“For all rough along the edges of fairways there should be an apron of

shorter rough, cut at from two to four inches, depending on the character of the rough. The purposes of this apron are, first, to hold a ball which is just off the edge of the fairway from running into deeper rough and, second, to avoid a severe difference in the difficulty of the shot for a ball which is a few inches off the fairway as compared with a ball just in the fairway.

Rough around Greens

“The handling of rough around the greens depends largely on the character of the greens, their size, and the difficulty of the shot to them, the purpose being, of course, to penalize a poorly played shot.

“To accomplish this, greens should be firm. When the greens are firm, small and tight, there will not be much need to increase the difficulty further by drawing the rough in close to the edge of the green. When the reverse is true, rough is necessary to give advantage to the well-played approach shot.

“For this purpose, a collar at slightly under fairway length should be maintained for a width of about 30 inches around all greens. Outside of this should be a cut of medium length rough, two to three inches high, from which a chip shot would be more difficult and which will also tend to keep a ball from running into the deeper rough. The width of this cut can vary from two to six feet, depending on the nature of the ground and the character of the shot to the green—wider where the shot is more difficult and narrower where easier. Generally, this cut would be maintained up to the margin of bunkers surrounding the green (where they are beyond the fairway cut), between bunkers, and to the crest of slopes and mounds closely surrounding the greens. Beyond this cut the deeper rough should be maintained. (Women’s and junior competitions: This stiffening of the course by the use of rough around the greens may not be necessary.)”