

“Reading” Greens

By BEN HOGAN

USGA OPEN CHAMPION 1948, 1950, 1951, 1953; BRITISH OPEN CHAMPION 1953

Much to my surprise recently I discovered that most duffers are amazed by the ability of the tournament professionals to “read the greens” on strange courses so quickly. By “reading the greens,” of course, I mean the ability of looking over the undulations, slopes and the grass on the putting greens and then deciding how the ball is going to travel after you stroke it.

Naturally, this ability is developed only by experience, but there are certain little hints which I will give you which will help you to become proficient at it. If the tournament-playing professionals are more proficient at reading the greens than the ordinary player, it is only because they have to play on so many different types of greens in the course of a year.

On almost all oceanside-course greens everything breaks toward the ocean.

When playing mountain courses, putts will always break away from the mountain. This is true even if, in “reading the greens,” it doesn’t look that way to you. Putting greens always slope away from the mountains because of the weather and erosion. What you will have to guard against in reading greens on mountain courses, however, is little things which your knowledge of golf will tell you can’t be true, although they appear to be so to the naked eye.

If you can locate the direction the grain of the green runs, you have won half the battle in your effort to get your putt down. One way of doing it is to look for the shine on the greens as you read them.

If you can see a shine on the green when you are lining up your putt, it means that you are putting down the grain of the green. The ball is going to travel very fast. You will have to make allowances for the speed of the ball down

the grain. Otherwise, you will be sure to run by the hole several feet and will have another and even more difficult putt coming back against the grain.

When I see a shine on the grass on the right side in lining up a putt, I play to the right even if I don’t see a break in the green in that direction because I know the grain is running from right to left. The reverse is true if you see the shine on the left, and you must then make your allowance accordingly.

If you are on the other side of the hole looking back toward your ball while trying to line up and see the shine, you will have to putt against the grain. When you putt against the grain, it stands to reason you have to hit the ball a little harder to reach the hole.

Sometimes on a green you will find that the grain of the green breaks to the right while the roll and undulation of the green break to the left. When that happens, you will have to decide whether you are going to play the grain or the roll. Occasionally in this situation it is a good idea to play the ball straight in the hope that one will offset the other. That is something you must learn for yourself via the trial-and-error method.

You should also develop your ability to tell the kinds of grasses on the greens and their consistency through the feel of your feet on them as you walk around. Get so you know the feel of the various grasses used on the greens and their relation to the speed of the ball. That knowledge will be very helpful to you in learning how to putt.

Remember in putting that the stroke can’t do it all. You have to know how hard to hit the ball and where to aim it.

From POWER GOLF by Ben Hogan, copyright 1948, A. S. Barnes & Company, Inc., New York.