



Grooming Your Golf Course Is Important!

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Professional golfers have said that they would rather play from a dirt road than try to control a shot from tall grass. Their explanation is that when the clubhead can make unobstructed contact with the ball from a close, firm lie, they can execute a better shot with greater regularity, and make the ball act in a more predictable way.

Of course, the same golfers would be first to admit that they wouldn't want to play too many shots from a dirt road because it would not only be unpleasant, but also wrist bruising. However, their point is obvious: close-cut turf is required for championship play. No one who knows golf could dispute this statement.

Nevertheless, we have observed courses that have a very fine turfgrass cover, and yet they play badly. Others may have a lesser quality turfgrass cover, and they play beautifully. Why? The answer is grooming!

Know-how in grooming doesn't come from theory alone, it results from experience, trial and error, common sense practices, and a knowledge of golf. One doesn't need to play the game well to be a master at grooming, but it is very important to know what good grooming is and how it affects play.

The late Joseph Valentine, long-time superintendent of Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, Pa., and the first golf course superintendent to receive the USGA Green Section Award, was a master at grooming a course for play.

While I had the pleasure of knowing Mr. Valentine for many years, I never knew whether he played well or played golf at all. However, he knew how the course should play, and it was always groomed to near perfection.

Merion was always ready for tournaments, whether local, State or National. He never had to exert extraordinary measures to shape the course up to championship standards.

QUALITIES OF A "CHAMPIONSHIP GREEN"

What then makes for championship standards for play? When you analyze the situation, it truly resolves itself to the need for a firm, dense, and close-cut turf on greens, tees, and fairways. We expect that greens should always be well-managed because the inferior green manager doesn't survive for long in this day when golf course management is at its highest plane. Also, greatest emphasis is placed on putting green management because approximately 25 per cent of the maintenance budget is allotted to the care of greens. A championship green therefore must:

- 1) Be mowed consistently at $\frac{1}{4}$ inch or less.
- 2) Be firm, but resilient, so that it will hold a shot played from a reasonable distance, when that shot is properly executed.
- 3) Be fast enough so that the ball will roll freely when properly struck with a putter.
- 4) Be free of excess grain and heavy leaf growth.
- 5) Be of such density that the ball will roll smooth and true.



Each ball is teed approximately the same height on bentgrass left, and bluegrass right. Which is your preference?

- 6) Be uniform in texture so that the ball will roll the same from any direction on like terrain.

WHAT ABOUT FAIRWAYS AND TEES?

No one will dispute the importance of the role of the putting green in golf. It is a fact that one-half the strokes allotted for a par round are charged to greens. But what about fairways and tees? They, of course, equally divide the remaining 36 strokes on a 72-par course.

The golfer is allowed to tee the ball 18 times, but seldom does anyone emphasize that this leaves a meager 18 strokes allotted to fairways, where they must be played as they lie. This points up the importance of the fairway program in providing a firm, dense, close-cut turf; turf on which every square millimeter has to be perfect. Why every square millimeter? Because the ball is round and so it comes to rest on a very small area, a few square millimeters, more or less. Grooming every square inch to perfection just isn't good enough.

Fairways comprise the largest fine turf area on any golf course, usually about 50 acres more or less, depending on the pattern of cut. Superintendents strive to keep fairways in perfect condition during all the playing season. However, static perfection with so dynamic an acreage is an almost impossible order. Traffic, weather, disease, insects, and weed competition all take their toll.

Grasses not only have their limitations, but

there are also management and economic limitations that dictate what can be done with fairways. How far can one go in providing conditions that the professional golfer describes as "tight and firm". We have grasses that thrive at a height of cut of 3/16 inch: our putting green grasses are an example, but for obvious reasons it isn't economically feasible to manage fairways exactly like greens. Costs not only would be staggering, but there aren't enough men or machines to do a like job.

Also, if the care of two to three acres of greens turf requires approximately 25 per cent of the budget, imagine how much 50 acres of fairway turf managed similarly would cost? Without a doubt, it's out of the question to expect fairways to be groomed, managed and maintained like greens with the grasses available today.

FAIRWAY GRASSES—BENT, *POA ANNUA* & BERMUDA

What are the principal fairway grasses and what height of cut limitations does each have? In the northern latitudes the cool season grasses such as the bentgrasses, the Kentucky bluegrasses, and the narrow-leaved fescues (creeping red and chewings) are seeded, *Poa annua* volunteers. In the southern areas the bermudagrasses mainly are used to establish fairways.

Bermudagrasses in general can be mowed as closely as the terrain will permit without suffering any setback. The new, finer-bladed

selections are great improvements over the common types, and they provide an excellent surface from which to play. The density of the newer selections and their greater leaf surface (compared to the stemmy growth of the common types) greatly enhance fairway lies.

It has been said by many that there is no better fairway turf than a tight-mown bermudagrass fairway, when it is right.

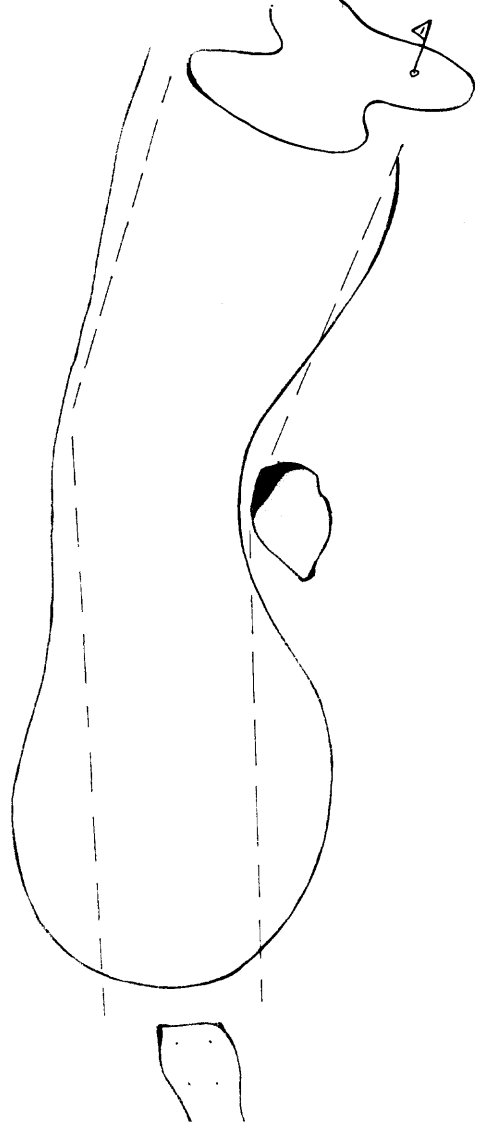
Which cool season grasses offer the same close cut lie that bermudagrass affords? Just two; the bentgrasses and *Poa annua*. Either of these could be mowed just as tight as the terrain allows. *Poa annua* grows upright, the blades are stiff, and the plant count per square foot is high. The colonial type bentgrasses — Astoria, Highland, etc. — also exhibit an upright growth, but their blades are softer. This turf must be mowed closely, otherwise the ball will nestle down into the turf more so than with the *Poa annua*.

The creeping bentgrasses exhibit a less upright growth than either Astoria or *Poa annua*, but the number of blades per square inch is quite extensive. Also, by virtue of its matting growth habit, it makes a carpet-like blanket over the soil. Penncross and Seaside bentgrass principally make up the creepers and have been used in small amounts because of their vigor. Today, up to 25 per cent Penncross bentgrass is being recommended for bentgrass seed mixtures on fairways. This is due to the failure of the Astoria types to perform up to their expectations. It is also due to the fact that we now have far better equipment, safer materials, and improved management techniques for maintaining the more vigorous creeping bentgrasses in fairways.

Bentgrasses will thrive at a cut between $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$'s of an inch. If they are cut higher, the blades will not support the ball as well, and so it will nestle down into the turf causing a less desirable lie. This is true of most turfgrasses; i.e., the height of cut makes a considerable difference as to whether the ball will rest on, or in, the turf.

The amount of water applied also determines whether the blades will be firm or soft. Too much water, unquestionably, softens the plant and contributes to making it lush and soft-bladed, too soft in fact to support the ball.

From what the scratch and professional players say about it, the best lies are those




Contour mowing makes fairways more attractive. It breaks the monotony of straight lines from tee to green.

that rest on a tight, firm turf. This could be our goal in fairway maintenance. After all, the game normally goes to the skilled players in any sport: why should it be different in golf? Some might say that this would place the high handicap golfer at a disadvantage, and this may be so for a while. But how else can one ever get to learn to control the ball unless he can practice and play from close lies? If the better golfers are better because they can control the ball, it is only reasonable to assume that the poorer golfers can only improve as they, too, learn more about control.

BLUEGRASSES AND FESCUES

The Kentucky bluegrasses and the fine-leaved fescues make up the other cool-season



Side view of Merion bluegrass tee mowed at $\frac{3}{4}$ inch regularly but at $\frac{1}{2}$ inch between tee markers so golfer can tee ball to height of his liking.

choices presently available. There are a number of different selections of bluegrass. Some are improvements, but most are not adaptable to the close cut required on fairways. In general, the Kentucky bluegrasses must be mowed at not less than $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch. This also holds true of the fine-leaved fescues. Some of the improved selections such as Merion bluegrass and Pennlawn creeping red fescue reportedly could be mowed closer, but few dare to attempt to mow them continuously at closer than $\frac{3}{4}$ to one inch.

FAIRWAY MOWING — FREQUENCY AND PATTERNS

All turfgrasses require frequent mowing. They perform better when mowed regularly and weaken when allowed to grow beyond their normal cutting time. Merion bluegrass is a case in point, it requires a heavy fertilizer program and therefore grows rapidly. Some Merion bluegrass fairways need to be mowed six days a week.

Another point that bears some consideration is that when grasses are cut high, they require more frequent mowing. For example, when mowed at $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch, grasses don't need to make much growth before they reach what some consider to be rough height of cut. This is in the area of $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 inches. With favorable weather for growth in spring and fall, such fairways need to be mowed continuously in order to keep them playable as fairway turf.

Another word about mowing fairways — more should be contoured, narrowed, or widened at accent points, rather than mowed in a straight line. Long, sweeping and curving fairway lines are "softer" and far more pleasing to the eye. When coordinated with the degree of difficulty of a hole, contouring can

serve as a hazard to keep the player ever aware of target points, places to aim and places to avoid.

TEE GROOMING

Tees also require a close cut for the principal reason that height of cut affects the height at which the player can tee his ball. If he must tee the ball higher than he normally prefers, chances are he won't meet the ball as squarely or as consistently as he will when he can tee to the height he prefers. Today's trend is to mow tees only slightly higher than greens. This affords the golfer the chance to tee the ball as high or as low as he chooses, and as a result he should be able to hit the ball more consistently.

Most tees in the northern regions are established to bentgrass and *Poa annua*. This presents no problem since these grasses can be mowed closely. On the other hand, bluegrass tees present a problem. Since tees normally are aerated, fertilized and watered on a good schedule, rapid growth is achieved. When bluegrass tees are not mowed frequently, it is sometimes difficult to get a wooden tee long enough to support the ball.

To circumvent this, some superintendents closely mow the turf between markers and hope that this infrequent close mowing will not weaken the turf. If the tee is large enough to allow sufficient changes in teeing area so that the markers are not returned to the same area for three weeks or so, this is a desirable technique.

On a number of occasions it has been said that "golf is played on grass." This statement is only half true. The complete statement should read: "Golf is played on grass managed specifically for controlled play."

Should this not be our objective?