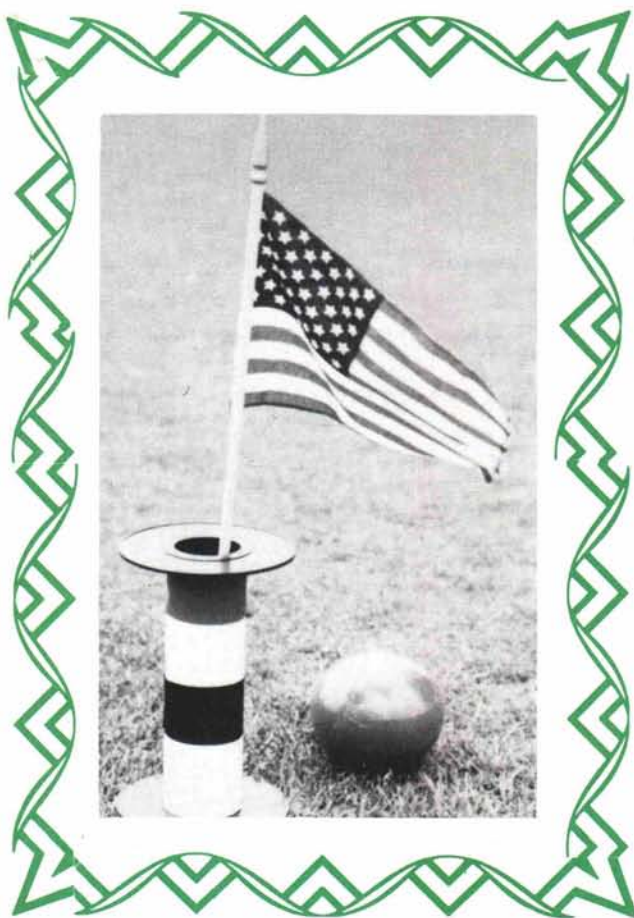


GOLF '76 – That's the Spirit



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I caddied in the 1926 United States Open Championship played at the Scioto Country Club where my father was golf professional. This year, 50 years later, the Open will be played at the Atlanta Athletic Club where I am the golf professional. Over this span I have seen many golf courses; I observed changes in golf course conditions that affect playing this game we all love.

I would like to tell about those changes, and I would like to start just as we would play a round of golf, on the first tee.

Some years ago the teeing area was merely a place to start the hole. I have seen cocoa-mats placed in concrete slabs and called tees. I have seen tees 100 per cent weeds, and the weeds were so tall that the players were delighted to find bare ground, even though it was extremely difficult to get the tee in the hard ground. Many of these were bare because green superintendents were not allowed to remove the trees which were caus-

ing these conditions.

Today, with watered tees and the many new grasses developed for specific conditions, some courses are able to have cups cut in the back of their teeing areas for players to practice putt while waiting to tee off. Yes, today if our players hit a bad tee shot, it is their fault and not the fault of the condition of the tee.

Now, we are in the fairway and what tremendous changes here. Many years ago, before sprinkler systems, summer droughts made playing fairway shots very difficult. Weed control was practically unheard of. Even if there was some grass on the fairway it would be so high that it would almost prohibit good shot control as we know it today. I remember playing in a tournament around 1950 before this particular course had watered fairways. The fairways were mowed very close, and the players could control the spin of the ball. Many compliments were offered because of



Electric fans have been used at greens to create air movement during humid nights.

the condition of the fairways. It is hard to believe they were 100 per cent crabgrass.

You should have seen these fairways in the spring, during a drought, or after the first frost—just bare ground. Some years later, after a sprinkler system was installed, this course had beautiful fairways.

The first attempt at watering fairways that I observed was at Scioto during the 1920s when a championship was scheduled during a summer drought. The fairways were getting quite hard and fast. The club made arrangements with the city of Columbus, Ohio, to use the street cleaning water trucks to water the fairways. You can well imagine the time involved to go around 18 holes, and you can also well imagine how little good this watering did.

The first real watering system I saw was also at Scioto. It consisted of water lines with cut-off valves running down the rough parallel to the fairway. A very crude line of sprinklers was assembled on wheels, pulled by a car into position and then connected to a cut-off valve. The sprinklers were allowed to run for an allotted time and then moved to the next valve. The valves were spaced to overlap the watered areas. This was an improvement over the water trucks, but it was a very inefficient operation by today's standard. Yes, today, under normal conditions, we have beautiful fairways—very tight and cut short. This enables the players to execute the great shots we have become accustomed to seeing.

My first recollection of rough was during the 1926 Open; I lost the first ball my brother hit in this Championship. You can well imagine what a frosty round that was.

My next recollection was in the South in the 1930s, when rough was cut by a sickle bar drawn by mules. During the heat of the day the mules had to be rested in the shade and allowed to cool off. The rough was really all weeds and not the grasses that we know today. Speaking of rough, you might be interested in the rough requirements for today's United States Open. USGA officials would like the rough to be uniform so that all of the players, as nearly as possible, receive the same lie—BAD.

The grasses of today, combined with the vast knowledge of our green superintendents, give us better conditioned rough and much more uniformity. To achieve this condition, however, more funds are necessary for weed control and fertilizers, but I believe we all agree that the results prove this money well spent.

Now for the green. Many improvements have been made on putting surfaces, and it is true that the most extreme improvements have taken place in the warmer climates. I can remember, however, some of the maintenance procedures used in the 1920s for the cooler climates. One of the examples—weeding greens with strings strung out to guide the men and their knives. Watering was done by a rotating sprinkler, covering only a small area, and the position of the sprinklers had to be changed periodically.

The first spiker I saw was a Dr. John Monteith invention—iron pipes with a handle and big nails drilled into position. The operator would stand on the bar, rocking back and forth, until it penetrated into the green. Can you even think what these operations would cost today, and what a sorry job they did by present standards.

Look at the construction of greens today. We now have scientific soil structure, great drainage and air ventilation; I remember seeing electric fans used to stimulate air circulation during humid nights. Looking at the putting surfaces of today and then looking back at the old days, it is really hard to believe that we have made such great progress.

In our part of the country we had two sets of greens, one for summer grass and one for winter grass. You can imagine what sorry greens we had with little character, bad green bunkering and, of course, poor putting surfaces as a result of having to use different types of grass. Today, we have either bent or one of the fine hybrid bermudagrasses which provide superior putting surfaces and allow for better designed greens.

In 1976 we are having the United States Open. A few years ago this would not have been possible.

Yes, golf courses in general are so much better conditioned today. In the 1950s, on our PGA Tour, many tournaments were played under conditions you would not believe today. Often so many local rules were involved covering unusual conditions. Fairways were so bad that players were allowed to improve their lie or play what are commonly called "winter rules." Drainage was so bad that the casual water Rule was worn out. Under such conditions, golf was not quite as we know it today.

We golfers owe a great debt to so many people and organizations for their work and efforts to improve playing conditions on our courses. A great amount of money has been contributed to research new grasses, new equipment and new methods of maintaining golf courses, while at the same time trying to hold down the cost, which is an increasing problem. The green superintendents and their various organizations have played an important part by their work with schools, seminars, and experimental stations. Through these activities, they have become real professionals in agronomy. The United States Golf Association, at great expense, I might add, has made considerable contributions with its Green Section Turfgrass Service program, research grants at various universities and experiment stations, and the work it does in conjunction with schools and colleges.

All of this educational work is important because young men must be trained to fill the need for future superintendents for the many new courses being built today.

These are many of the nice improvements we have witnessed during the last 50 years. Unfortunately, some areas of the game have not been improved and might even have lost ground. These areas need our attention. Golfers today desperately need to develop a pride in and respect for their golf courses. We must have a program educating players to rake bunkers, repair ball marks, etc. Also, it is imperative that golf carts be operated properly, thereby inflicting as little

damage as possible to the course. We need to stress strongly one of the basic rules of the game—play the ball as it lies. Even with the greatly improved playing conditions of today, far too many golfers are playing what we refer to as "winter rules."

Golf etiquette certainly has not improved with age; slow play is always a big problem. We need a constant educational program dealing with these problems. Golfers must be reminded that good golf etiquette, observance of Rules, and proper care of the course is all to their benefit.

Last, and probably most important, we need better lines of communication between green superintendents, the golfers, club officials and golf professionals to prevent unjust criticism of the green superintendent. All should be informed of current stages of course work as well as long range plans. Once this group understands your problem, in my opinion, your job will be more pleasant.

At the Atlanta Athletic Club I have a great relationship with Bob McGee, our superintendent, and I feel that he is the expert in this field. I try to be of all possible help to Bob by relaying the golfer's viewpoint, as well as explaining to our members why certain things are happening to their course, all to make their golf more enjoyable.

Harold Sargent, Atlanta Athletic Club golf professional. A career spanning 50 years of golf.

