



*Ball resting on Poa annua, a water-loving grass plant, now the predominant species on many irrigated golf courses.*

# Firm vs. Soft Playing Conditions

by JOE BLACK

**W**HEN I WAS a very young man, I had aspirations of becoming a great tournament player. I worked hard at my game, and I was fortunate enough to earn my Tour card. At that time the "World Championship" was played every year at the Tam O'Shanter Country Club near Chicago. It had the most prize money of any tournament at the time, and it was the first tournament I selected to play in. Fortunately, I qualified to play.

You've heard of sleepers and rabbits; well, I was a dew sweeper.

I was one of 150 professionals playing. There was also an amateur competition, a women's professional competition and a women's amateur competition, so I think the number of players in the tournament numbered some 300.

My tee time the first day was at 6:06 A.M. Getting up at 4 o'clock was a new experience for me, and so was dew on grass. I was going to be very smart, and since it wasn't quite daylight, I was going to try to hit it down the fairway the first few holes, shoot for the middle of the greens,

two-putt. I just wanted to stay around par until it became light enough and I became awake enough to take a run at the golf course.

On the first hole I drove the ball right down the middle of the fairway, about 150 yards short of the green. I played an 8-iron and shot right at the middle of the green even though the pin was tucked in behind the left bunker.

I hit what I thought was a real good shot, but when I walked up, the ball wasn't on the green. One of the groundkeepers was raking the bunker behind the green, and so I thought, well, maybe it went in the bunker. When I asked him if he had seen the ball, he said, "Oh, you mean the one that flew over my head and out-of-bounds?"

That's when I learned what wet grass will do to a golf ball.

In Texas, we don't have conditions like that. When you're playing under wet conditions, you have a lot of what players on the Tour call "shooters" or "flyers." When grass comes between the club blade and the ball, it reduces the amount of spin on the ball, and the ball shoots or floats. It will travel a much longer distance than normal. As a matter of fact, the Rules of Golf prohibit putting anything on the clubface that might create this condition.

That was my first experience in learning to play under wet conditions. Obviously, my game

---

JOE BLACK once was Tournament Director of the PGA Tour and is responsible for setting up golf courses for the PGA Championship. He is the golf professional at the Brookhaven Country Club, in Dallas.



plan was destroyed on the first hole, and I didn't play too well in the tournament thereafter.

There are pros and cons of playing under wet and dry conditions on various parts of the golf course. I'm not proficient at talking about wet conditions because in Texas right now we are 25 inches under normal rainfall for the last four years. We are in a drought period.

On the teeing ground, the optimum would be a fairly dry condition, because the more the tee is watered, the more it tends to become dangerous because of slippery footing. Obviously, one of the good things that can be said about a little wet condition on the tee is that it might make it a little bit easier to push the peg into the ground, but I don't think too many of us have much trouble doing that anyhow.

In wet conditions the ball will not roll far and most players lose a lot of distance. There is also the problem of mud on the ball.

Since wet conditions dramatically reduce the spin on the ball, a player can't control distance or direction. This results in a loss of maneuverability. To a lot of players, maneuverability is not too important, but to good players maneuverability is very, very important. It enables them to cut or draw the ball into a pin position, or otherwise finesse it into position on the green.

Wet, soft conditions, in effect, have the same effect as widening the fairway, which, I believe, hurts the game. Much of the skill in accuracy is taken out of the game. Dry conditions shorten the golf course, and while not everyone will agree, I think it's great to have a golf course shortened a bit. It allows more control, and to me the advantage should go to the best player.

The best players truly control the spin of the golf ball. This makes it much easier for them to hold the green and to maneuver the ball to difficult pin positions.

Another thing about dry fairways which I think is very important is that it narrows the fairways and requires the player to be a much more accurate driver. I think one of the best examples I could give was the 1977 PGA Championship at Pebble Beach. As you know, Pebble Beach had had a tremendous drought and on many holes, particularly the 9th and 10th, it was almost impossible for the players to hold the ball on the fairways. Dry conditions tremendously narrow the width of the fairways.

When the rough is wet it is a tremendous problem, particularly if it is allowed to grow high. First of all, the ball cannot be hit very far out of tall, wet grass. For the good player who keeps the ball in the fairway, it's no problem; for the poor player who strays into the rough a lot, it's very, very bad. Again, it's difficult to control the spin of the ball out of the rough. Also, the heavy grass will grab the blade of the club, many times negating the loft, many times causing the blade to open. The result is erratic shots.

Of course, the intent of rough is to penalize a poor shot, but wet conditions make playing out of the rough ever so much more difficult.

Wet, heavy grass sometimes will keep the ball in play and prevent the ball from running into difficult situations, such as behind trees or other obstacles.

The ball can be hit a greater distance, where the ground is dry, and the ball can be controlled much better. The dry grass won't grab the blade so much. Dry turf tends not to create as many flyer lies. The only time that I know of when there has probably been a perfect rough, or at least when the players agreed that it was perfect rough, was under very wet conditions.

During the 1972 PGA Championship at Tanglewood Golf Club in North Carolina a few years ago, we experienced nine inches of rain before we could top out the rough — it was about seven-inch bermuda rough — and it was as wet as it could possibly be. I believe it was Chi Chi Rodriguez who said, "This is the fairest rough we've ever played — no one can play out of it!"

I will tell you this, they could not play out of the wet rough at Tanglewood, and so it wasn't surprising that the two players who came right down to the final hole, in position to win the championship, were Jack Nicklaus and Lee Trevino. This is what good rough does. With good rough the best players will be on top every time.

As for bunkers and wet conditions, you have the obvious first problem — the embedded ball. These are extremely difficult shots to play, and they are, in my opinion, very unfair. There is also the possibility of casual water in the bunkers, which creates a situation in which a player may take relief without penalty. Unfortunately, sometimes there is no place for the player to take relief; as a result, he might have to take a penalty





in order to move away from the casual water in the bunker. Water in the hazards, therefore — and particularly in bunkers — is a very, very bad situation.

On the putting green, the optimum playing condition for championships is to create very, very firm playing conditions. I know that when I'm conditioning a golf course for a PGA Championship, we begin on Tuesday to dry the greens. We do no more watering than necessary, which normally means we water very lightly to try to keep the greens as firm as possible. The reason for that is that we want only the players who play shots with a lot of spin on the ball to be able to hold the green; players who play poor shots should not.

We try to have the greens extremely firm in championship play, firmer than most clubs would normally want to keep their greens for member play. I feel that optimum playing conditions, even in club play, require very firm greens, again to give the advantage to the better player. Firm greens also keep ball marks to a minimum, and so you have a better putting surface. Turf on wet greens obviously is easily damaged. You'll see more larger ball marks and more spike marks.

Wet greens create poor putting conditions. The player with a better touch loses advantage because wet greens usually are slow. Also, the ball normally will not break nearly so much, as it will on a dry, firm green. Consequently, far less talent is needed to read them. Optimum playing conditions would be on dry greens, simply because the advantage should go to the player with the best touch, the one who can read the greens best. Also, dry greens don't present nearly the problem with spike marks or turf damage from ball marks.

In the final analysis, my preference for conditioning a golf course for regular member play as well as championship play is to try to keep the golf course as dry as possible, merely to keep the grass alive. In my opinion, for many years we have tremendously overwatered golf courses. We have been more concerned with creating a beauty spot than in setting up optimum playing condition for the game itself.

Whenever I consider this problem I think of my experiences playing golf in Scotland. To me the British provide optimum playing conditions — the turf is very tight and very dry, which allows the player every opportunity to spin the golf ball. The greens are very firm and very dry and only well-executed shots hold the greens. The rough is so severe that it takes skill simply to get the ball back in play once you've hit into it. That is the way the game was intended to be played.

I think that in this country we have moved away from this ideal. We overwater despite the fact that we have a tremendous problem with water conservation. Practicing water conservation, I think, will help us to create better playing conditions.

As a golf professional, I can tell you that my members complain most when the golf course is wet. I'm always a little bit sensitive to their feelings, and I am concerned about the women who come out to play in the morning when there is dew, or when they have to play early after the course has been watered the previous night. They complain about wet feet and shoes rotting. It's just a deplorable condition to play on very wet golf courses. Maybe water conservation will create better playing conditions for all of us.

*Golf is enjoyed on unwatered fairways in parts of the world where through the years tough grasses are the result of nature's oldest law and only the fit survive. 18th hole, St. Andrews, Scotland.*

