



Jay Sigel

A Playing Comparison of British and American Courses

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WHEN MEMBERS OF an American club discuss the condition of their golf course, the conversation typically dwells on color, not on playability. I suspect that television has helped to develop these attitudes; I have been in a number of TV production facilities and noted their great concern for the TV viewer and on how they might color the picture to make it more appealing for the viewer. This is also the prime reason for overseeding dormant bermudagrass fairways with ryegrasses, to make the event more attractive for the viewer, not to improve the dormant bermudagrass playing surface.

Twenty-five years ago my home course didn't have watered fairways. Each year our grass turned brown. During the six to eight weeks of summer, I also remember the high level of playability of that golf course, the feeling of being able to control a shot from the turf because that turf was firm. I know that the older players also enjoyed this because they got more roll. Also, the speed of the greens certainly was faster; the overall pace of the course was much quicker, and it seemed to translate into faster play.

Let's compare the British and the American golf courses as I see them. The British courses have no motorized carts at all that I could see on the four courses we played — St. Andrews and Muirfield, in Scotland, and Hillside and Royal Birkdale in England. The color of these golf courses is drab, like the weather there. Height of the grass, I think, is of interest. Approach fringes were very, very short, enabling us, during the Walker Cup Match, to putt

the ball from up to 40 yards off the green. Of course, the fairways were also very close-cropped. The rough was very high and variable in growth and plant population. You'd have to call it rugged compared to ours.

A lie in the rough in Britain or Scotland requires a very delicate shot just to move a ball back to the fairway. On our courses, a lie in the rough can sometimes be better than one we might have in the fairway. Sand in their bunkers is extremely firm, and the bunkers themselves are very deep. I've had conversations about water with a number of people, and of the four courses I played, the only watering system I saw was at Hillside, where the British Amateur was played, although I understand that St. Andrews has an irrigation system.

In general, only a few British courses have watering systems, and I know of none as sophisticated as ours. Their greens are very firm, but certainly not as good to putt as our greens. They are grainier than ours and very close-cut. American players liked their firmness. They were very consistent.

I believe Tony Jacklin recently said that one of the reasons American players produce generally better results is that they are better putters, and that better putters are developed on better greens. Our putting surfaces are far more smooth than those on the four courses that I saw.

THE BRITISH DO NOT play winter rules; they do not even know what winter rules are! I found that interesting. They don't know what mulligans are either. That alone must spare their first tees from much abuse.

I must admit that until I became a member of the Green Committee at

Aronimink last year, I really hadn't given much thought to differences in golf course management practices. Now I wonder why have we moved so far away from the conditioning like the courses where the game originated and away from an emphasis on good playability? I guess part of the answer is that the average American golfer's fetish for soft, lush turf often pressures the superintendent into applying more water and fertilizer. This in turn increases *Poa annua* encroachment and related problems of summer turf weaknesses. By forcing growth and color, we increase maintenance requirements which in turn increases budget expenditures. Does forcing growth then make good golf sense?

As for the better player, I don't think he minds *Poa annua* one bit, as long as it is cut closely. He doesn't become concerned if the turf turns brown and the *Poa annua* thins out or dies as long as he can strike the ball cleanly with the club face. We all recognize that this is the way golf is played in Great Britain. Golf there is played on grass, not color. If the American golfer could play from a firm surface, he would be able to control the ball better. In my opinion he would improve his game and he would enjoy golf more.

Shouldn't we try to give this playability back to the game? Wouldn't that conserve energy and precious water? Wouldn't that save dollars for clubs that now are experiencing troubled times? I pose these questions though I certainly don't have the answers. I thank you all for helping me to better understand some of your problems in the regrettably brief association I've enjoyed with you. Thank you for inviting me.