

Place the Emphasis on Playing Conditions

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Although thin, a closely mown turf can provide a good playing surface.

IT IS NOT unreasonable to say golf course conditioning has made tremendous progress during the past 25 years. Just how much progress may be measured in a number of different ways. For example, glance through the pages of an old golf magazine and note the playing conditions of yesteryear. Never has the golfer had better playing turf than he has today.

Not many years ago, sand greens really were sand greens; i.e., the putting surface was actually made of sand with oil mixed in as a binder. Old pictures frequently show a player addressing his ball on a fairway, but you will only be able to see the tops of his shoes. The rest of his footwear is hidden by grass. We have all seen pictures of old golf courses lacking in turfgrass uniformity, whether on greens, tees, fairways or roughs. Closer study shows unkempt bunkers, dry or moisture stress turf, weeds, and of all things, players and caddies actually walking the course!

Golf course managers today maintain a grass cover that would defy the imagination of players in the early 1920s. Tees today are mostly level.

Fairways are closely and frequently mowed. The rough, relatively speaking, offers almost no obstacle at all. The bunkers are meticulously groomed. Putting surfaces are beyond belief. Not only are the putting surfaces grass, but they are uniform stands of grass covering the entire playing area. The greens are closely cropped, grain has been mostly brought under control, and the hole location is changed many times a week.

These changes in golf course conditioning have also brought about changes in the Rules of Golf. No longer is a player required to play over pitch marks made by the impact of a shot to the putting surface. No longer is the stymie rule in effect. Yet today's players want to take the Rules even further. They want to be permitted to move a ball to a preferred lie and, seemingly, to eliminate any possibility of luck playing a role in their score.

Not only have changes in the conditioning of the course and Rules "improved" the game, but the instruction and equipment that is available to the players today have made equal strides. Almost every modern invention, in

some way or another, is now used to benefit the golfer — computers, videotapes, exercise equipment, special training diets, and even psychiatrists are now in the game.

SCIENTIFIC GOLF equipment has made great advances in the quality of the instruments used to play the game. Investment cast irons, heel-toe weighted woods, metal-headed "woods," frequency-matched light steel shafts (combined with non-slip power grips), and balls that go farther, fly higher and last longer have all contributed, theoretically at least, to the game's progress and enjoyment. The golf cart surely falls in this category.

But have all of these "advances" actually added to the character and real enjoyment of the game? That would be hard for one to believe if one took into account the crescendo of complaints heard today. Winter Rules and preferred lies are still in demand. Calls for irrigating greens until the poorest shot played to them will hold are very popular. Roughs are "monsters" and fairways should have plenty of grass so the ball may be scooped. Without these qualities, some players return to the clubhouse and exclaim, "I play golf to enjoy myself — not to be embarrassed by it!" It does not matter how hard turf management people may try, they probably will not succeed in pleasing such players because the traditional game was not intended to be enjoyable using these criteria.

The game of golf is basically a game of skill. Some golfers are better at it than others. Some individuals work harder at refining their skills than others. The old adage, "The longer the player practices, the luckier he seems to get," is perhaps lost on today's casual golfer. And then there is, and always will be, the undeniable element of luck involved in this game. The "rub of the green" is still in effect.

THERE ARE a number of ways to make the game more enjoyable for its participants. The USGA, for one, has developed a handicap system for players. The system is not designed to give one player an advantage over another (skill does that), but to allow players of differing abilities to play competitively against the course as well as one another.

The club golf professional can add tremendously to each player's enjoyment of the game. Through his teaching and encouragement, the pro can not only improve the player's shotmaking skills and abilities, but also provide greater interest and understanding of the Rules of Golf, handicapping, and the player's actual participation in competitive matches.

Certainly, every player enjoys being out of doors as much as he enjoys the condition of the course as it relates to the game. Many competitors will tell you the most important outside element in any game of golf is the condition of the course itself. Playing conditions dictate how equitable the stroke allotment is in the final score. A very soft, overly wet playing surface will reward a poorly played shot. Soft conditions also make all golf courses play long, and this surely does not benefit the high-handicap player. Long grass, as an excuse for preferred lies, encourages all players to hit fliers. Indeed, golf courses that are overly watered and maintained under the philosophy "it has to be green to be good," actually reduce the requirement of skill and the true enjoyment of the game.

Maintaining a golf course with firm, level tees, uniform closely mown fairway turf, rough grass mowed high enough to insure a reward for the fairway shot, and greens firm and fast enough to reward a well-played approach shot and well-stroked putt are all part of this game of skill. The golf course superintendent and grounds committee can have a tremendous influence on the standard of play. Every golfer on your course this year will be influenced by what you do with course conditioning. It affects every shot and every other phase of this skillful game. A round of golf can be many things. However, they will all be more enjoyable with your emphasis on better playing conditions in 1982.

Playing conditions are as important for everyday play as they are for tournament play.

