

The Stimpmeter — A Perspective

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THE STIMPMETER is a device for measuring the speed of putting greens. It was made available for club use by the USGA in 1977. Its purpose is two-fold: first, to establish a guide to green speeds for tournament play, and secondly, to establish a guide to green speeds for regular membership play. The following comparison tables were published in 1977, also, and the fact that they have held up without change to date is a credit to their accuracy.

**USGA Green Speed Test
Comparison Table
(Regular Membership Play)**

Fast	8'6"
Medium-Fast	7'6"
Medium	6'6"
Medium-Slow	5'6"
Slow	4'6"

**USGA Green Speed Test
Comparison Table
(Tournament Conditions)**

Fast	10'6"
Medium-Fast	9'6"
Medium	8'6"
Medium-Slow	7'6"
Slow	6'6"

Before the Stimpmeter, there was no positive way for a club selected as a site for a national championship to determine accurately the speed or uniformity of its greens. It seemed incongruous for the best players in the nation to compete for a championship and not always be provided every opportunity to use their true putting skills to the fullest. The Stimpmeter proved there was significant variation among greens on many golf courses used for USGA events, and this prompted Green Section agronomists to establish a management program that now serves as a guide to attain speed and uniformity for all USGA compe-

titions. These speeds are shown in the table for Tournament Conditions. However, the term Tournament Conditions was never clarified, and herein lies the rub! Did the USGA suggest by these tables that clubs were supposed to oscillate from regular membership speeds to tournament speeds for every club tournament? No, this obviously would be an impossible task to impose upon any golf course superintendent. Was the tournament speed table established to suggest that standards for players of national and international caliber should be different from the speed standards for the average golfer? The answer here is a resounding yes! Their game is totally foreign to the game played by the average golfer, and it follows that the course should be set up specifically for that exceptional caliber of golf. Only a few clubs are willing to take on the challenge to shift management gears for the intensive maintenance required to handle national and international competitions and to make the sacrifices.

WHAT GOES INTO the special tournament preparations necessary for a USGA championship? Let's give you an insight! Two years before the target date, the Green Section agronomist responsible for championships schedules his first visit to discuss on-site conditions and USGA turfgrass specifications for their competitions. A two-year conditioning program is discussed and agreed upon with the host golf course superintendent and club officials involved on committees appointed to work with the USGA to assure that turf conditions will be as nearly perfect as possible. Periodic visits by the Green Section agronomist during these two years help ensure that USGA turf projections are progressing on schedule.

As for greens during this time, a few major changes are recommended. These include a sparse nitrogen fertilizer program, an accelerated topdressing pro-

gram, and a judicious vertical mowing program. All other programs remain the same for most of the two preparatory years. The decisive change on greens occurs four days in advance of the formal practice round. From that day on through the competition, all greens are double-mowed daily at a height that will assure that green speeds will be at the prescribed pace beginning on the day of the formal practice round. This speed ranges between 8'6" and 10'6", depending upon the specific championship. Having been prepared over two years, there is no problem in reducing the height of cut on greens slightly to attain the necessary speed.

Green speeds for the Junior Championship would not be as quick as for the Open Championship. For example, if the designated speed agreed upon for a specific championship is nine feet, all greens, including the practice green, are conditioned to average nine feet beginning on the day of the formal practice round. Since the formal practice round is traditionally played on Wednesday and the tournament is played from Thursday through Sunday, this means that all greens are kept at the designated tournament speed *for five days only* . . . six days if there is a playoff! In the specific example cited, all greens rolling in the range of 8'6" to 9'6", or plus or minus six inches from the designated target speed of nine feet are considered uniform.

IMMEDIATELY after the competition, green speeds are returned to their normal regular membership speed! Unfortunately, golfers who attend the tournament or watch on television conclude that the speed they see during the competition is the speed the club maintains all year around. This is not so! It is costly and indeed risky to attempt to keep greens at an average above 8'6" all season long. Now, having said that, there are always exceptions! The few clubs that prided themselves on their

fast greens long before the Stimpmeter came into use still do everything they can to uphold that tradition. It is important to them to do so, and they are willing to budget and to take the risks in the interest of tradition.

So much for the national championships. Now let's turn our attention to special club tournaments, such as their men's and women's club championships and state championships. How should clubs prepare greens for these events? Should they use the tournament speed table or the regular membership speed table? Without question their choice should be the regular membership speed table. They should work towards increasing green speeds a comfortable few inches above speeds normally maintained the year-round. This can be done within budget and without danger of turf loss simply by double-mowing (without changing the mower setting) beginning four days before and every morning during the competition. This practice should increase speed from three to six inches over the everyday speeds normally encountered. For example, if the club's regular everyday green speed averages

7'9", double-mowing in the manner described should increase the green speed average to somewhere between 8'0" to 8'3" for the competition.

WHAT SHOULD the pace of greens be for the average club? The USGA does not dictate a pace but suggests that clubs select a speed from the regular membership speed table comfortable for the membership, and then take the necessary measures to insure that all greens, including the practice green, putt uniformly. From my personal findings, during several years of testing greens while in the employ of the USGA Green Section, I was surprised and disappointed that too many greens measured less than seven feet. In my opinion, all northern clubs with bent-grass greens should average between 7'6" and 8' for most of the playing season. This, I feel, is where good putting quality begins. After all, greens are the most intensively maintained turf of all the playing area; therefore, it follows that they should be flawless in roll and pace for most of the golfing season.

One of the major problems has been that putting green grasses were fertilized too heavily. It took years to convert to programs of sparing fertilizer use, not only in total, but also sparingly per application! This is most important, for even one heavy nitrogen application per year could spoil the grass texture for that entire year. It is the way to better greens! Some call it a low fertilizer program. I disagree with that statement entirely; it is the only way, the right way to fertilize greens!

The Stimpmeter is not only a remarkable management tool, it can also serve as a barometer to gauge your total greens program. It is extremely accurate and provides a very high degree of repeatability. The Stimpmeter can serve as a positive influence on greens management. If used in a positive way for improving uniformity and quality of putting surfaces, more golfers will enjoy increased pleasure from the game . . . because of the chance to improve in what many consider the most important part of the game, their putting skills! Isn't that what golf turf management is all about?

USGA Northeastern Director Jim Snow checks the ball speed during a Turf Advisory Service visit.

