

Should Carts Ride the Fairways?

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MANY QUESTIONS about golf course management simply cannot be answered in a forthright manner. A simple “yes” or “no” will not always work, and frequently no statement of fact from an expert can put the question to rest. A person knowledgeable about a subject must often respond by saying, “It depends.”

Such a response would certainly be appropriate to the question of whether golf carts should be allowed on fairways. Because of the continuing increase in the use of golf carts, this has become one

of the most frequently asked and controversial questions we must deal with. The use of golf carts has a direct impact on the maintenance of the turf, the revenues at the club, and the golfers’ enjoyment of the game. As a result, the golf course superintendent, the golf professional, the club manager, and all the golfers have a direct stake in cart policy. No wonder this is such a controversial matter.

It is the golf course superintendent’s job to provide a course for golfers to enjoy. It is also his duty to take the

necessary steps to maintain consistently healthy turf throughout the season, even if this means placing restrictions on the golfers from time to time. Therein lies the problem. Golfers would naturally like to drive their carts anywhere on the course at any time. At the same time, golf course superintendents know carts must be restricted for the sake of the turf under certain conditions. Golfers generally feel that superintendents are too conservative in their philosophy about restricting cart use, thereby detracting from the enjoyment of their

Deciding on cart use policy from day to day is an important function of the golf course superintendent. These signs are mounted directly on the front of each golf cart to remind golfers of the current policy.



rounds on many occasions. On the other hand, superintendents tend to feel they are too conciliatory when it comes to allowing carts on fairways.

There is no doubt that under certain circumstances golf cart traffic can have a very negative impact on the short- and long-term condition of turf. Coming up with a reasonable policy, however, is not easy. Cart traffic can damage turf in several ways, the most obvious through wear and abrasion. If traffic is heavy enough or weather conditions bad enough, carts can cause turf to wilt to the point of no return, leaving thin, weak areas open to encroachment from *Poa annua* or other weeds. Even lighter traffic loads may require fairways to be watered or syringed frequently to prevent wilt. Under certain circumstances, traffic can predispose the turf to increased disease activity, or it can cause disease to spread from one part of a fairway to another.

A more subtle form of fairway injury, but one that may be more debilitating in the long run, is the effect of cart traffic on soil structure. Persistent traffic on certain soils, especially when wet, can result in compaction problems that inhibit good water infiltration, reduce oxygen content, and restrict root growth. Ultimately, if corrective measures are not taken, the turf will become weak and thin and subject to disease and weed encroachment.

The direct effects of wear and abrasion and the more subtle effects of soil compaction are cumulative. It is possible that heavy traffic on fairways, especially when soil or weather conditions are unfavorable, can lead to a slow decline in the health and playability of the turf. It is difficult to convince golfers that the use of carts directly contributed to the poor condition of the fairways.

Factors to Consider

Naturally, everyone would benefit from a cart policy that would not only allow golfers to use carts, but at the same time would avoid short- or long-term injury to the turf. Golfers like to remind us that "The Let-Em-Run Country Club down the street allows carts to roam the fairways at all times. Why can't we?" The superintendent usually has legitimate reasons for restricting carts at certain times that may not necessarily reflect the conditions at Let-Em-Run Country Club. For example:

Standards for Quality — There's no question that cart traffic will hurt fairways. Clubs that consistently want the

best fairway turf usually place restrictions on carts whenever conditions warrant.

Soil Type — Heavier soils, those with greater amounts of silt and clay, tend to be wetter soils, and are more prone to compaction effects. Take care to avoid heavy cart traffic on these soils during periods of wet weather.

Drainage — Turf on golf courses with poor drainage suffers more from cart traffic. Installing drainage tile on such courses can significantly extend periods when carts can be used with relative safety.

Grass Species — The greater the amount of *Poa annua*, the more likely fairways will sustain damage from cart traffic. Predominately bentgrass, perennial ryegrass, or Kentucky bluegrass fairways can tolerate much more traffic than *Poa annua* turf.

Irrigation System — A properly designed automatic irrigation system can provide a greater margin of safety for cart use during a wider range of weather conditions. Such a system permits fairways to be syringed more quickly and efficiently than a manual system, thus reducing or eliminating turf injury caused by wilting.

Amount of Traffic Expected — Naturally a golf course with a large number of golf cart rounds can expect greater damage than one with little traffic. If golfers wonder why their club may have changed cart policies in the last five or 10 years, they might consider that the use of carts has increased dramatically over that period.

Terrain — Carts on hilly terrain usually cause more damage than they do on flat ground. Thus, cart restrictions often have to be applied more frequently on hilly golf courses.

Cultural Maintenance Practices — Courses that can afford increased maintenance programs to compensate for damage from carts (*i.e.*, regular aerification, spray programs, overseeding, etc.) have more flexibility to allow carts on fairways. On the other hand, courses that can't afford these programs would probably keep a closer check on their carts.

Availability of Paths or Wide Roughs — Courses are more likely to restrict carts from fairways if they have a good cart path system or wide, open roughs that allow traffic to be more widely disbursed.

Potential Effects of Traffic on Roughs — Many courses have established a cart policy that minimizes cart traffic on fairways, only to find that restricting

carts to the rough areas leads to an unacceptable amount of damage there. In anticipating such damage, several factors in addition to those above should be taken into account: 1. the width of the roughs relative to the tree line, 2. the effects of tree root competition on the vigor of the rough turf (root pruning could be done to relieve these effects), 3. the wear tolerance of the grass species in roughs, 4. whether or not the fairways are contoured (roughs bordering straight-line fairways tend to take more of a beating), and 5. whether or not the roughs are irrigated to any extent. Unirrigated roughs will not handle traffic well during periods of dry weather.

Alternatives

After giving consideration to all of these factors, the actual cart use policy should be established next. Although every golf course seems to take a slightly different approach, most clubs tend to choose among the following possibilities for the framework of their policy, even if it has to be changed from season to season:

- Allow carts to roam anywhere they please at almost any time.
- Allow carts on fairways during spring and fall, but not in summer.
- Allow carts on fairways during summer, not winter (bermudagrass).
- Allow carts on fairways when the weather is not too wet or too hot.
- Allow carts to cross fairways at right angles, weather permitting.
- Never allow carts on fairways, only on paths or in roughs.
- Keep carts off all turf areas at all times; stay on paths.
- Get rid of the carts altogether; use caddies or carry your own bag.

Some courses try to be as flexible as possible with cart policy by changing the rules during the course of the year as conditions change. Unfortunately, this runs the risk of making the system so complicated the golfers become confused and the rules become unenforceable. For the sake of simplicity, other courses decide on a single policy and try to stay with it under all kinds of conditions.

Regardless of the decision, cart use policy will remain a hot political topic at many golf courses for as long as carts are present. By using common sense and taking into account the above factors, it should be possible to develop a sound policy based on facts and reason. For the sake of the turf on your golf course, let's hope so.



(Left) Neither snow nor sleet nor soggy fairways will stay these golfers from their appointed rounds.

(Below) Cart traffic damage on a hot, windy summer afternoon.

(Bottom) Restricting carts to the roughs can result in damage to the turf along the edge of the rough.

