

NO HOLES: “Play (Practice) Away, Please”

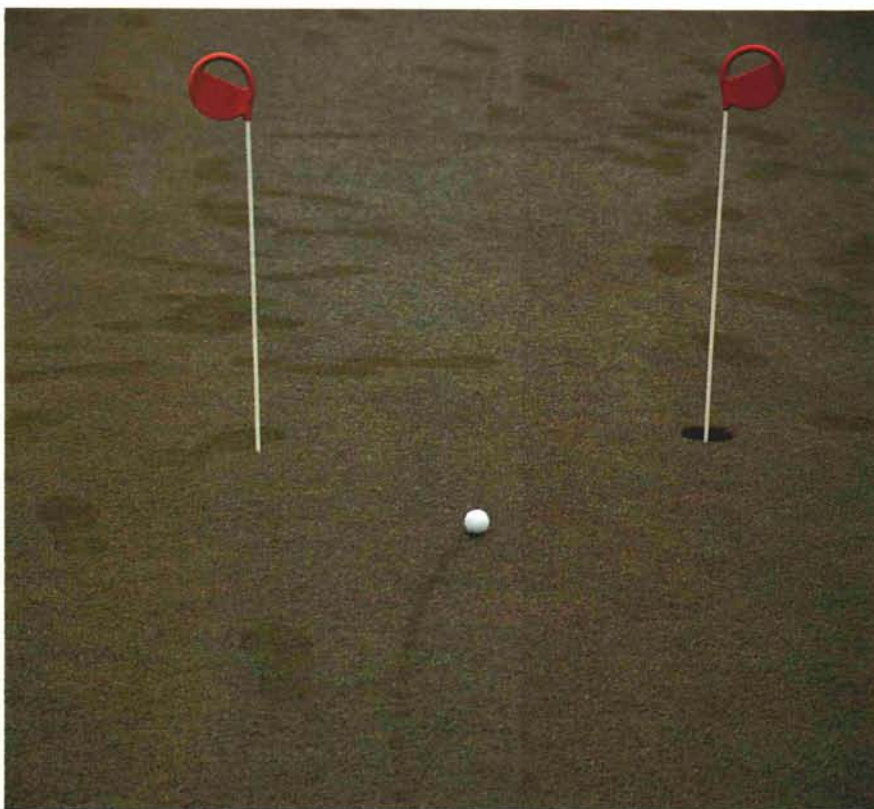
by ROBERT BRAME

Director, North-Central Region, USGA Green Section

HAVE YOU EVER looked at a practice putting green after a hard day? How about a practice putting green in late August after the last big golf outing for the summer? It's not uncommon to see turf that resembles a war zone. Soil appears through the thin, weak turf surrounding the six, nine, or sometimes 18 holes distributed over the previously uniform green carpet. Take a closer look — ragged and rounded hole edges, and often a dozen or more previous hole locations that were cut either too low (dark green circular depressions) or too high (4¼-inch scalped patches) can be seen. It's not a pretty picture.

Think about what this same practice putting surface might look like if the holes were not being used. A practice putting green with no holes — what a crazy concept! Or is it?

Golf is a mental game. According to many of the game's great teachers, this is particularly true of putting. If you think you're going to miss the three-foot putt, you probably will, or at least it becomes a lot tougher to knock in. It is interesting that many golf instructors actually discourage practice putting to a hole. The idea behind this philosophy is that you condition your mind either to see the ball going in or missing the hole. These thoughts carry over to the golf course. If you're missing on the practice green, you will likely develop a negative mind-set, and it may get worse on the course. Conversely, if you're knocking them in on the practice



With some modifications, putting green flagsticks can be used with or without a hole. Eliminating practice putting green holes would reduce maintenance costs and improve turf quality, while still allowing beneficial practice.

green, you will expect to continue on the course.

The suggestion by many golf instructors is to practice putting to a spot, or place a tee in the ground for a target. The theory makes sense. You get the feel of the putting surface without focusing on whether the ball goes in the hole.

Improving your putting game by looking at a spot rather than a hole? An interesting idea, but how about the agronomics? Even if the holes are changed daily on a practice putting green, wear can be very destructive. Worn and bruised turf is more prone to disease activity and weed invasion. This means more chemicals may be needed to counteract the effects of heavy, concentrated wear on the putting surface.

Distributing player wear over a larger area results in healthier turf and a better playing surface. This concept sounds great, but how can wear be monitored and the holes changed often enough to prevent heavy traffic damage? If the practice holes are changed several times on busy days, what will the putting surface look like with numerous transplanted plugs trying to survive and grow in? Agronomically, there would be value in not using holes on the practice green.

Why not simply cut the base off the small flagstick normally used on practice putting greens and sharpen the end? Now the small flagstick may be pushed into the surface at any location, and the need for standard holes is eliminated.

The small-diameter holes made by the practice green flagsticks are virtually unnoticed. As wear occurs, players, pro shop personnel, or the maintenance staff can quickly and easily move a flagstick, simply by pulling it up and pushing it in somewhere else. This strategy completely eliminates transplanted plugs from hole changes and the labor time needed to move and repair holes. In addition, directing a player's practice efforts at a target flagstick has the potential of producing a better mental foundation for scoring on the golf course. Most golfers would agree, this is an attractive combination of benefits.

Give it a try. Fill in the holes on your practice putting green, sharpen the practice green flagsticks, and “play (practice) away.”